A KITE'S STORY

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Nehru Bal Pustakalaya

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Dedicated to

Jojo (Abheek Ghosh) and Riyan (Priyanshu Datta Roy)...
my nephews and to
Jhilik (Ashmita Aditya), Riti (Sanjukta Datta Roy)
and Rimi (Srijita Datta Roy)...my nieces.

May the singing bird be with you always.

Acknowledgements

I must, first of all, thank my avian friends whose presence in my life has brightened it considerably. Whatever the circumstances of life, they give me reason to look forward to the next dawn with hope.

I give most grateful thanks to the green trees that do not just give me life-sustaining oxygen and fresh fruits but also shade in summer and roosting space for the birds. We would not be here but for them!

To my army of young comrades in bird- watching my heartfelt thanks for their unstinted enthusiasm.

As always, my sister Dr Sutapa Ray in UK read and re-read my manuscripts and gave her comments and suggestions. For the first time, severely critical observations were few and this motivated me to embellish the manuscript.

My friend Mrs Kanchan Wanchoo Sharma has always had nothing but encouragement for me in all my endeavours. However, her reaction to the first draft of the manuscript overwhelmed me. It was reassuring to know that the manuscript had met the high standards, which is the hallmark of the National Book Trust, India.

Special thanks are due to Ms Surekha Sachdeva, my editor, for her passion and perseverance. I also wish to thank Shri Samaresh Chatterjee for the beautiful cover design.

- Sukanya Datta

Preface

The seed for this book was planted on 15 March 2012 when Sunny, my neighbour's son, came to invite me to come and see the Cheel chick on the Seemul tree near our apartment. His father, Mr Jyotirmay Sikdar had rigged up his video camera to shoot the mother bird feeding her chick. From that moment on, I was hooked. I began to shoot the chick's progress using a small Samsung aim-and-shoot camera with a mere 5X zoom. Then, I began to post the photos on Facebook.

I was pleasantly surprised by the positive comments and encouragement I got. My cousin Mrs Suparna Datta Ghosh in Singapore came up with the name Jatayu (Jats) for the chick. The name stuck. Friends and family started asking for more photographs especially about his adventurous explorations as he learnt to fly. Photographing Jats became a daily activity.

I soon realized that the Silk cotton tree was a bird- magnet. From my balcony, I recorded their presence with a cup of coffee in one hand and the camera in the other. The annual cycle of the tree also unfolded before me in colourful detail. I photographed its bare beauty as well as its floral decorations and cotton pods.

The birds became my friends. I learnt to observe them as I walked to and from office. I was amazed by the avian diversity I recorded. I had not expected to find so many species in the heart of India's capital. It is a measure of the resilience of Mother Nature in the face of relentless hostility and shrinking habitats. It made me realize how fragile existence is. It humbled me and made me more appreciative of the value of what still remains.

Five children in my colony were intrigued enough to mob me one day. They asked about what I was photographing. When I said I was photographing birds they wanted to know why. I countered by asking them to name five common birds. Their answer was a revelation.

Crows, pigeons, common mynah and cheel were the names they immediately recalled. However, after that they were stumped. On being prompted one of them blurted out...flamingo! She had seen a documentary on the flamingos of Gujarat but not one in real life. I realized that children today did not know the names of most birds that are still around us...birds that are still hanging on by a claw.

Perhaps children today do not have the privilege of living in green surroundings. I began to give my neighbour's children tips about spotting birds. I began to show them my photos and to encourage them to put out water in summer and to look out and to look closely.

My sister Dr Sutapa Ray in UK thought I should weave a story around this. Her voice found resonance among all my Facebook friends too. So the book wrote itself...the words flowed effortlessly just as a bird soars without trying too hard. This has really been a labour of love for me.

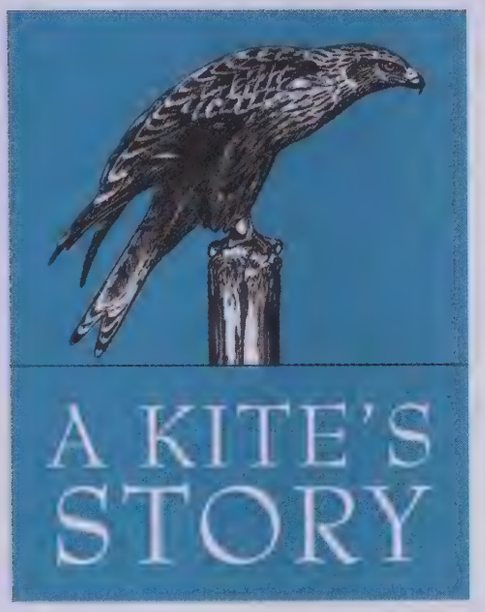
The book grew out of a shared experience which I now hope to share with a larger audience. My wish is a simple one. I would love every child to open his or her eyes to nature and to unlock the curiosity lying latent in their young minds. An inexpensive camera in the hands of children can empower them to explore their immediate surroundings. A mind primed to appreciate nature will learn to care for and conserve biodiversity.

A story in the *Matsya Purana* says that Goddess Parvati planted an Asoka sapling. On being asked what merit that would accrue from planting trees Goddess Parvati replied: "... a son is equal to 10 ponds and a tree is equal in merit to 10 sons."

Wherever possible let us plant a tree. Let us water trees and protect them...for only then will the birds come. Let us put out a bowl of water for the thirsty animals and a few crumbs for them too. Conserved biodiversity means a sustainable planet and an enriched life for us all.

The Chinese say..."If I keep a green bough in my heart, the singing bird will come."

This book is my green bough...may it bring the singing birds to you as well.



Mrs Milvus Cheel folded back her wings and sighed. Her nest; a rough platform of branches furnished with bits of cloth and plastic, and constructed in the fork of a tall Silk cotton tree, was empty.

Kite

Mrs Milvus Cheel had named their home Cheel Ghar. That is because family and friends in India, called them Cheel and Ghar meant home.

Her son, Jats was perched gingerly on a thin branch. His chocolate coloured feathers still bore white marks which indicated that he was not yet fully grown. Fully grown? He was just under two months of age, and still had a long way to go before he became an adult. But his yellow legs were well developed and he had strong black claws to hold on to the branches.

Mrs Milvus Cheel looked fondly at her nest and her eyes misted a little. It was their nest. The nest of Mr and Mrs *Milvus migrans govinda*. Mrs Milvus Cheel had named their home Cheel Ghar. That is because family and friends in India, called them 'Cheel' and 'Ghar' meant home.

The world at large had named them Kites; the Small Indian kite to be precise. Formerly they were called Pariah kite, a name she did not like at all. How can we be Pariahs, when our cousins living in Mehrangarh Fort were considered sacred birds by the Kings of yore? Besides we clean up carcasses and offal which would have otherwise polluted the surrounding, she thought with an angry toss of her head. We are important members in Mother Nature's scheme of things; well-respected members of her family! We help to keep the planet clean. Earth needs us; relies on us.

The *Milvus* Kite family was a large and far-flung one. Although they were all Kites, the clan that lived in India added *govinda* to their names, while those that lived in Taiwan added *formosanus* to theirs. European black kites described themselves as *Milvus migrans migrans.* But none of them have a powerfully forked tail like ours, thought Mrs Milvus Cheel proudly. We are really quite regal looking birds.

No matter, whether Cheel or Kite, the happy news was that after three years of having been together, Mr and Mrs Cheel finally had a baby chick. The first-time parents had named their chick Jats...short for Jatayu, a venerated name in avian families.

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Empty cheel ghar

She remembered vividly how just the chopping of some of its branches had led to a personal tragedy.

Mrs Milvus Cheel could not think of a better place than Cheel Ghar to raise future generations. She loved the Silk cotton tree very much although Shisham, Mango, Peepul and Banyan trees would have done just as well. It was certain that she would feel the loss of the Silk cotton tree if it were to be cut down; or if a storm uprooted it. She remembered vividly how just the chopping of some of its branches had led to a personal tragedy.

Last year, a human had climbed the tree to cut a few branches. Mrs Milvus Cheel had been startled by the sudden appearance of a human head so high above the ground. She had flapped her wings awkwardly and risen jerkily into the air... trampling her eggs in the process. The man who had climbed up to cut down the branches had fared badly too.

Baby chick with parent

It is difficult to say now who had been more surprised; the man or Mrs Milvus Cheel, who had been brooding her eggs. They had shocked each other. "Cheel," the man had yelled letting go of the branch he had been holding.

Mrs Milvus Cheel had taken to the air, her powerful wings brushing the man's face, and her deadly talons just inches from his eyes. The man had fallen from the tree. He would have died, had he plunged straight down. However, the many branches broke his fall. As he lay stunned, with a broken elbow to boot, Mr and Mrs Milvus Cheel returned to their nest. Shrill cries had filled the sky; both eggs lay smashed. There would be no chicks in Cheel Ghar that season. Year before last, she had laid eggs but had lost them to nest robbers...the birds who ate the eggs of other birds. There had been no eggs left and so, no chicks.

She had not raised any chicks for two years in a row.

This year the Cheel couple had taken no chances, but guarded their nest without any breach of security. Of course, they were still at the mercy of humans. Just yesterday, a child had shot at them with a catapult. If he had a better aim or more firepower, it would have meant the end of the bird he hit. A bird mummy or a

Mother kite guarding her nest

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Dead baby bird

bird daddy or both would be dead. Then who would take care of the orphaned baby birds?

What senseless hostility, thought Mrs Milvus Cheel to herself. Humans could be so un-necessarily cruel sometimes. Last week, she had seen a Pigeon's neck sliced by the thin thread used to fly colourful paper kites. It had bled to death. These threads were coated with ground glass and often resulted in avian casualties. Birds could not see these threads. Even if they did, they were unaware of the threat these glass encrusted threads represented. Flying into these threads could mean anything from a slashed wing, if lucky, to decapitation and death. And if one parent died, the chick's chances of survival would have become really slim...because it took the efforts of both parents to raise the chick.

Last week, she had seen a Pigeon's neck sliced by the thin thread used to fly colourful paper kites. It had bled to death. These threads were coated with ground glass and often resulted in avian casualties.

A Crow had sneaked the Pigeon head from right under Mr Milvus Cheel's beak, but the headless Pigeon had made a tasty treat for Jats. Turning her thoughts away from gory matters, she looked at Jats with joy. It filled her with happiness to see her chick exploring the branches just outside the nest. With maternal pride she observed him assess the distance with his eyes. He then took a measured leap to land on the branch. His open wings

helped keep his balance as he hopped along the branch to gaze inquiringly at a flower; one of the few still left on the Silk cotton tree.

Jats struggled slightly to keep his balance as the branch swayed in the breeze. He had insisted on trying out his wings. How impatient he had been to fly even before his flight feathers had fully developed.

Chicks! She thought with a shake of her head, they never listen to their parents. How fortunate that he had learnt the rudiments of wing control before last night's storm had hit. It was a blessing that he had known, more out of instinct than any real learning, how to control his flight, at least a little. It was thanks to flight control, that he had not been slammed on the ground when he

Chicks! She thought with a shake of her head, they never listen to their parents.

Home alone chick

Kite on a sharp lookout for food and enemy

was swept out of the nest he had almost outgrown. Without that little control, he would have been dead. But that had not happened. Jats was alive, trying out his wings, none the worse for wear.

Birds never plan ahead. They do not worry about the future. Nor do they obsess over the past. Mrs Milvus Cheel was no exception. The danger was over. Jats had survived. That was the end of the story.

She looked up to see her partner Mr Milvus Cheel soaring on thermals or the rising columns of hot air. She did the same too when she needed to circle around looking for food. It was called passive flight because little, if any, energy was expended. They did not even need to flap their wings regularly. The rising currents of air kept them airborne; effortlessly. Mrs Milvus Cheel could see her partner's chocolate brown body and the forked tail quite clearly. She was aware that he had a bird's eye view of all that was happening.

She knew he kept a sharp lookout for roadkills. Animals run over by fast-moving cars were a regular source of fresh meat. She was actually a little afraid of these fast-moving things, but accidents did provide food that just needed to be scooped up instead of being hunted

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down. It was just that she had seen Crows and Kites being hit by the cars as they swooped down to snatch the dead animal. Any misjudgement of the speed of automobiles was potentially fatal. She was careful around cars and hoped Mr Milvus Cheel would be too. She needed him to come back to the nest with food and he needed her to return safely with food, too.

With a shrill cry to alert her mate, she took to the air, flapping her wings in long leisurely strokes. She remembered their courtship period. Both of them had tried to outdo the other in spectacular aerial displays. They had soared. They had dived. When Mr Milvus Cheel had dived towards her, she had turned over in full flight to present her claws to him. They had grasped each other's toes and cart-wheeled towards the ground; separating and flying off just in time to avoid crashing to the ground. It had been an exhilarating experience. They had showed off their flying skills to each other. She had been impressed and agreed to establish a nest with him. They had been together for three years now.

Suddenly she swooped down, picking the piece of bread from the garbage dump with her claws. As she flew away she transferred it from her foot to her beak.

She remembered their courtship period. Both of them had tried to outdo the other in spectacular aerial displays. They had soared. They had dived.

Baby kite hopping around the nest

She kept a sharp lookout for other Cheels that could waylay her and try to snatch away the food she had been so swift to scoop up. Then she realized that the morsel was too big to be eaten in flight. It would have to be taken to some place safe where she could eat it at leisure. She decided to take it back to Cheel Ghar.

We have been so happy here at Cheel Ghar, she thought as she landed in the now-empty nest. It was good luck to have spotted the site before some other bird couple claimed it for their own.

The Silk cotton tree was a big one; almost four-storey high. The main trunk had divided into two thick branches very early in its growth. The left hand branch had grown straight up before finally branching out on its own. The other one had trifurcated midway and it was here that Cheel Ghar was located.

Cheels liked to build their nests where food was abundant. They liked to be near agricultural fields, wooded areas and near water bodies. Availability of food was why Cheels nested close to humans. Cheel Ghar was located in an area where food and water were both abundant. That is why, Cheel Ghar was such a desirable address. Because it was wedged securely against three supporting branches, the nest was solid enough to bear the

Cheel Ghar was located in an area where food and water were both abundant. That is why, Cheel Ghar was such a desirable address.

combined weights of the parents and the growing chick who insisted on hopping about restlessly.

Mr and Mrs Milvus Cheel had both taken part in creating Cheel Ghar. Mr Milvus Cheel had brought suitable branches and nesting materials which Mrs Milvus Cheel had arranged to her satisfaction. She had taken the largest sticks and laid these on the outer edge and used the smaller ones towards the centre of the nest. She had lined the middle of the nest with soft grass and bits of rags. It had taken her almost two weeks to build Cheel Ghar.

How they loved it! Mrs Milvus Cheel had stayed in Cheel Ghar for almost three weeks before she actually laid her eggs. She had laid two pinkish white eggs; the second one about 15 days after laying the first one. She knew these would hatch at different times too; the one laid first would also hatch first. She had settled down comfortably to brood her egg. It would take anything from 35-40 days for the eggs to hatch. For most of the time it was Mrs Milvus Cheel who sat on the eggs. However, Mr Milvus Cheel did not neglect his duties either. He brought food for her and defended the nest with its precious contents. During that time Mr Milvus Cheel had been at his

She had laid two pinkish white eggs; the second one about 15 days after laying the first one.

Kite admiring its nest

Parenting was a difficult business; particularly since Jats had begun to pace impatiently in the nest.

aggressive best, fighting off real and imagined intruders in earnest.

Mrs Milvus Cheel could have laid the eggs any time from December to May but, like most Cheels, she chose to lay them in February. Mrs Milvus Cheel liked to time her egg laying in such a way that the arrival of spring, with its abundance of food, coincided with the arrival of her chicks. Many other birds did just that. It made rearing chicks a little easier. Mrs Milvus Cheel almost smiled to herself... the growing chicks were hungry all the time; they really ate a lot.

Parenting was a difficult business; particularly since Jats had begun to pace impatiently in the nest. Mrs Milvus Cheel was worried that he might 'walk' off the

Baby kite learning to fly

nest into thin air. It had been known to happen. Thankfully, Jatayu Cheel had more sense than that! But, this particular time in Jat's life was cause for parental concern.

A young bird that has recently acquired its flight feathers is called a fledgling. At this stage the baby bird first ventures out of its nest. The fledgling period is the time of highest mortality for birds. Baby birds at this stage of their life often die of starvation if they venture far away from their nests and cannot return. They also fall prey to predator attacks or else meet with crippling or fatal accidents. Danger was in the air for fledglings who often did not recognize it. How could they? They had no experience.

She looked down and saw a large bare playground with scattered clumps of grass. Some kids were playing a game running around with a bat in their hands. Others were throwing a ball into the air and catching it. She knew the kids could never throw the ball high enough to hurt her or her family. She simply hoped that they would not bring out their catapults.

It really was a nice neighbourhood with many tall trees. There were Banyan trees with their tasty red berries. Humans did not eat these fruits so there was always enough on the trees for all the birds that

Kite having a close look at its surroundings

They also fall prey to predator attacks or else meet with crippling or fatal accidents. Danger was in the air for fledglings who often did not recognize it. How could they? They had no experience.

Many birds feasted on the Mulberry tree that bore juicy mulberries. But the neighbourhood children gave them stiff competition and often frightened them away.

flocked to it. Perhaps this was the reason why these trees, with their large, leathery, glossy green leaves were like magnets for birds. There were tall Peepul trees too with heart-shaped leaves and berries that tasted yummy.

There were also many Neem trees that gave shade, bore nectar-rich flowers and edible fruits. Their bitter leaves kept away insects, but enriched the soil when these were shed. Bees and other nectar-loving insects liked this tree.

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Banyan tree with red berries

The Common fig tree grew tall. It was home to many birds. The Figs were round, small and green when young, but large, succulent and red when ripe. The ground underneath the tree was usually littered with overripe fruit that had fallen from the trees. Many species of birds, but never Cheels, could be seen gorging on the sweet fruit when Figs were in season.

The houses nearby had their own little gardens with herbs, shrubs and trees. The Tulsi, with its medicinal leaves, grew in large clumps in every garden. The Cheel couple could see Mango, Banana and Guava trees nearby.

There was a Jackfruit tree as well. Knobby-skinned jackfruits grew out of its trunk. However, most birds found the thick skin too tough to cut open with their beaks. They flitted around the tree in the hope that a ripe fruit would fall off the tree and burst open spilling its aromatic pulpy flesh and large, hard seeds. This did not happen very often as the humans plucked the unripe Jackfruit for their own consumption. However, when it did happen, the birds had a feast.

Mrs Milvus Cheel thought it was very selfish of humans to eat everything that grew in their gardens and not leave even a tiny bit for the birds and the beasts. We

Common fig tree

Many species of birds, but never Cheels, could be seen gorging on the sweet fruit when Figs were in season.

need so little, she thought but the humans deny us even that little bit. Of course, some good souls did put out grains like *Bajra* and *Jowar* but even they usually never left fresh fruits and vegetables. Mrs Milvus Cheel often wondered why human beings put out rotting fruits and vegetables that they themselves would never eat. Why should we eat decaying fruits with fungus growing on them, when we can eat fresh fruits growing on the trees? Sometimes the *Bajra* and *Jowar* seeds sprouted and grew into plants that bore still more seeds. Thankfully, the humans did not lay claim to such plants and the seed-eating birds such as Sparrows and Pipits had a little variety in their diet.

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The Cheel couple had noticed that when fruits or vegetables rotted on the ground, sometimes mushrooms grew on them. Instinctively they knew, as did all birds, which Mushrooms were edible and which were deadly, if eaten.

From their high perch on the Silk cotton tree, the Cheel couple could see a clump of flowering pink Oleander. The pointed leaves were spear-like. The pretty flowers were sweetly scented, but the Cheel couple knew that the milky sap that oozed, when a leaf was torn off or when the stem was injured, was

poisonous. On their many aerial sorties above the city, the Cheel couple had observed that almost no insect pests attacked these plants. Even the cattle and goats, that otherwise ate anything green, avoided these plants. No wonder these plants provided much of the little available shade on busy Indian road-dividers where they flourished despite heat, dust, and scant water. Mrs Milvus Cheel sometimes wished these trees could be a little sturdier and taller so that she could rest on their branches when she felt tired.

Birds can see in colour, it allows them to spot ripe fruit hidden under leaves. Thus, the Cheel duo appreciated it when the Mango trees put out new leaves to announce the arrival of spring. The new leaves were not green. Rather, these were a wonderful shade of garnet that turned green only when older. So, the Mango trees had leaves of many hues... all in varying shades of greenish- garnet. Soon, tiny Mangoes would dangle like pendulums. Most would fall off the tree before ripening, ripped off by the fierce summer storms that rocked Cheel Ghar every year.

The few Mangoes that remained on the trees would attract adventurous kids and birds alike. These Mango lovers

Kite resting on a branch of a tree

Birds can see in colour, it allows them to spot ripe fruit hidden under leaves. Thus, the Cheel duo appreciated it when the Mango trees put out new leaves to announce the arrival of spring.

Mango tree

did not mind a few bites from the ants that lived on the Mango tree and which regularly patrolled it. Those birds that loved fruits often tasted and damaged many fruits before selecting the one they polished off. The Cheel couple did not care; they were not, strictly-speaking, fruit-eaters.

Every April, the Guava tree near Cheel Ghar was covered in pretty white blossoms. Nectar-seeking insects flocked to it in large numbers. However, the fruits it bore were small and hard. Most fell off without ever ripening. Perhaps it needed extra care. The humans that watered the garden every day did not seem to relish the fruits.

The Monkeys that lived on the Ridge nearby sometimes descended on the Guava tree and ate the fruits. They also played havoc in the garden, eating roses and other flowers, uprooting small plants, breaking branches and tearing the clothes put out to dry. They turned everything upside down. It amused the Cheel couple to see the human beings react hysterically to the presence of the Monkeys. Well, I wouldn't have liked to have them create such disorder in my ordered life, thought Mrs Milvus Cheel in a rare moment of solidarity with the humans.

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However, by and large, disruptions in the gentle order of days were rare. Life went on at its own pace. The seasons changed slowly but surely. As winter bade farewell, days began to lengthen. The plants seemed rejuvenated. Come March and tiny buds adorned most plants. The warmth coaxed the birds to emerge from their hiding places. The air was sweet with birdsong.

Tiny insects too crept out into the sunshine, ready to explore every plant for food and a place to lay their eggs. Even the humble Tulsi was sought out by Honey bees for the nectar in its *manjari* or flower-spike. The Honey bees had constructed a hive behind the Rangoon creeper and also on an abandoned nest close to Cheel Ghar. Every year the hives grew larger.

Mr and Mrs Milvus Cheel wondered where the golden yellow, stinging Wasps, with pinched-in waists built their nests. Then one day they saw a lady pointing a light-emitting box at a Wasp's nest high up on her balcony. She was most careful not to disturb the Wasps in any way. Her box flashed light a couple of time. She smiled when she looked closely at the screen on the box.

The Lantana plant always threw out bunches or clusters of tiny flowers

Tiny insects too crept out into the sunshine, ready to explore every plant for food and a place to lay their eggs.

Thread-waisted wasp

Cheels did not much care for the Guava, Oleander, Tulsi or Lantana.

to welcome spring. Every cluster was different from the other clusters in colour because the individual flowers were all uniquely variegated in shades of white, pink, yellow and orange. The leaves were aromatic, if crushed. Many insects did not like the scent; but nectar-drinking birds were attracted to its flowers. Cheels did not much care for the Guava, Oleander, Tulsi or Lantana. However, they would not have minded nesting on tall trees such as the Gulmohur with its fiery-red flowers, Neem, Banyan, Peepul or any other sturdy tree with leaves that provided much-needed shade.

The Laburnum or Golden chain trees were still bare and would not bear

Laburnum tree

cascades of bright yellow flowers till May. Many small birds, Bees and Butterflies would then flock to drink nectar from the hanging bunches of flowers. It was a joy to see the tiny birds flit in between the flowers and twist and turn their tiny bodies to best position their beaks to suck nectar. Locally, this tree is called *Bandar-lathi* meaning Monkey stick tree, a reference to the long and dangling seed pods.

The fruits of the Jamun trees were relished by both humans and birds. These trees started flowering from March to April and bore many small and fragrant flowers. The flowers grew in open, stemmed clusters from small side stems usually below the leaves, and so, remained largely unobserved. The oval-ish fruits developed by June. The fruits were a glistening deep purple; almost black. The ripe fruits were sweet with a slightly astringent taste that lingered. Each fleshy fruit encased a hard inedible seed. Those children that feasted on too many Jamuns ended up with their tongues dyed purple. Birds such as Mynahs loved eating Jamuns too. Those who ate the Jamuns always spat out the seeds. Some of these spat-out seeds germinated, and in time, grew into another fruit-bearing Jamun tree.

Birds such as Mynahs loved eating Jamuns too. Those who ate the Jamuns always spat out the seeds. Some of these spat-out seeds germinated, and in time, grew into another fruit-bearing Jamun tree.

Jamun tree

Natural cavities in trees provide shelter to birds

The long-stemmed pink and white flowers of the Rangoon creeper perfumed the air with their fragrance. Small birds explored the creeper with a view to building a nest hidden from all eyes. The Frangipani tree, festooned with bunches of white flowers with yellow centres, also added to the scents in the air.

Best of all was that the trees near Cheel Ghar were old ones. Many insects lived on or under their bark. These insects attracted the insect-eating birds. The natural cavities in the trunk of these tall trees provided many birds with shelter away from inquisitive human eyes and interference. It was lucky that these trees had not been chopped down to make space for buildings. The flowering and fruiting trees near Cheel Ghar continued to give free shade, shelter and sustenance to all in need.

The *Milvus* Cheels were non-vegetarians by preference. They did not touch the flowers of the Silk cotton tree. They would rather catch a mouse or a rat. A young Pigeon learning to fly was a treat. A piece of bread from the garbage dump nearby was also acceptable. They were not above snatching a *sandesh* from the hands of a child eating out in the open. The months of May-June were good times as far as fresh meat was

The flowering and fruiting trees near Cheel Ghar continued to give free shade, shelter and sustenance to all in need.

concerned. Around this time, Pigeon fledglings began to take their first flight. Many ended up as a Cheel's lunch or dinner.

Just across was a building with a garden. It had a henna hedge that was a safe refuge for many tiny birds whose chittering livened up the atmosphere. However, Mrs Milvus Cheel had seen these tiny birds get frantic when the hedges were trimmed and the branches discarded along with their nests! They flapped their wings and chirruped in a distressed manner. But they were so small that the humans did not even notice. Those that did, ignored them or tried to shoo them away, saying, "Sparrows!!"

Mrs Milvus Cheel sometimes wondered if human beings could see anything at all...or else how could

But they were so small that the humans did not even notice. Those that did, ignored them or tried to shoo them away, saying, "Sparrows!!"

Female sparrow

There was even a garbage dump nearby. Humans threw away so much food! Rich pickings could be had. Food was never short for scavenging birds!

they term, any and every, small bird as Sparrows! The birds she saw were definitely not Sparrows. She wondered if human beings had noticed that there were few real Sparrows around these days. Humans did not even notice the pretty birds perched on their clothes line next to their freshly washed clothes, garden chairs or on electric poles.

Well, what can you expect of humans? Just recently, one of them had pointed at Cheel Ghar and called it a Crow's nest. Mrs Milvus Cheel had been truly offended. She had called out shrilly but the human had gone his way without another glance at Cheel Ghar, leaving her wondering how humans functioned in nature if they were so blind to it.

Humans also seemed to like to cut down things...even though she had built her nest so high up, she hadn't still been safe, had she? A human being had climbed the tree to chop down some branches. Still, on the whole, it was a nice address to have. There was even a garbage dump nearby. Humans threw away so much food! Rich pickings could be had. Food was never short for scavenging birds!

From her nest, Mrs Milvus Cheel could see the stairs going up to the top storey of the house nearby. She scanned her surrounding with sharp eyes that

Kites live close to human habitat

missed nothing. Yes, the lady was also there, standing in her balcony pointing a box-like thing that sometimes flashed like lightning. Initially, Mr and Mrs Milvus Cheel had been greatly perturbed by her presence. They had felt threatened by the box-like thing in her hand. They carried out many aerial sorties before they were reassured that the lady meant no harm and presented no danger...either to them or to their chick. Now, they did not mind her staring at them. Somehow they sensed that she was a friend.

She was.

She had hurried to help Jats when he had been dashed to the ground. It happened just as day broke after a storm late at night. Like every day, the lady had come out to her balcony with biscuits for the Crows. She had immediately noticed the four dogs surrounding Jats. The lady had sensed that Jats was in trouble.

Jats, oblivious to the magnitude of the danger a pack of dogs represented to a stricken chick, had sought to fend them off by himself. For all his posturing, with wings spread widely to look bigger than he was, four dogs were much more than even a full-grown Cheel could tackle. Help had come in the nick of time.

From her balcony, the lady had thrown a pebble at the dogs, which scattered.

Jats was dashed to the ground

Jats, oblivious to the magnitude of the danger a pack of dogs represented to a stricken chick, had sought to fend them off by himself.

Then she had come flying down the stairs to where Jats lay supine on the ground. Mrs Milvus Cheel had been reassured to see that the lady had not touched Jats. If she had, Jats might have lashed out with his beak and talons. The lady stood protectively near Jats till he recovered from the stress of facing four full-grown mammals with hostile intentions.

The lady had smiled to see Jats get up and waddle, with whatever dignity he could muster, through the opening in the henna hedge and fly weakly up to the Peepul tree nearby. She nodded at Mrs Milvus Cheel who had been watching the incident from her perch as if to reassure her. Mrs Milvus Cheel had been too worried to really notice. The moment Jats reached a low branch on the tree; she flew to his side and read him the riot act. Mr Milvus Cheel had joined her. Between them they had escorted Jats back to the nest.

You'd think Jats would learn his lesson; but no! His next excursion left him dangling upside down from a branch.

You'd think Jats would learn his lesson; but no! His next excursion left him dangling upside down from a branch. He had hung suspended from the branch because his left wing had snagged a branch. He hung there, two storeys above the ground, without struggling or fluttering. This was probably a good thing because there was a good chance

that his wing could have broken had he done so.

A fledgling with a broken wing had very little chance of survival. The Cheel couple regularly hunted such fledglings because these were weak and unable to fly away. Mr Milvus Cheel shook his head...Jats would have to learn the rules of safe flight by trial and error. As a parent he hoped his chick would not break his neck learning to fly. Last year he had seen the Red-vented bulbul lose two chicks while teaching them to get airborne. Thankfully, Jats had managed to free himself with just one strategic jerk. Hopefully, he would look before he took flight the next time. Safety was of paramount importance. It was the key to survival.

Mrs Milvus Cheel knew she was safe. The nest was high up on the Silk cotton tree, which was still almost leafless, for it was only April. As if to make up for its leaflessness, the tree still had many buds and flowers. Silk cotton flowers were very big; red with thick leathery petals and lots of nectar which attracted all sorts of birds. In February-March, when she had been brooding her eggs, the tree had been a pretty sight with its pale and bare branches laden with big, bright red flowers.

Baby kite

Mr Milvus Cheel shook his head...Jats would have to learn the rules of safe flight by trial and error.

Silk cotton flower

It was a feast for many species of birds. Many came from far and near to gorge on these flowers and their bounty. They knew the sumptuous spread would not last very long. By April end, the last of the flowers would have fallen off. Pods with cotton inside would have made their appearance. Enveloped in a parachute of silken cotton would lie the precious seeds. Once the pods burst, the seeds would be carried to far-off places by the breeze. There, some lucky seeds would fall on fertile ground; strike roots and establish a new Silk cotton tree.

But for now, Mother Nature's lunch table was serving a lavish spread of Silk cotton flowers sweet with nectar and with a rich sprinkling of pollen. Mrs Milvus Cheel had enjoyed counting the many avian visitors to her home tree. It made the tedium of sitting on the eggs, a little easier.

There were the different kinds of Parakeets; these were all referred to as *tota* in Hindi, although there were at least three distinct species. All the three species of Parakeets nested in holes in tree trunks. They often took over the holes made by other birds and enlarged it for their own use. It was amazing to see how swiftly they could enter and exit their nests.

Mrs Milvus Cheel had enjoyed counting the many avian visitors to her home tree. It made the tedium of sitting on the eggs, a little easier.

All three species were quite noisy, tearing up the petals in their greed and haste. Mrs Milvus Cheel rather disapproved of such a lack of table manners. The Parakeets were quite destructive, really. The most destructive were the largest of the three –the voracious Alexandrine parakeets or the *Hiramon tota*. These wore red shoulder patches on their green wings. The feathers on their abdomen were yellowish-green, and some tail feathers were bluish-green with the underside being yellow, which made them very colourful to look at. The male Alexandrine parakeet also had a pink collar on the back of the neck, with a black stripe on the front. They were larger than the Rose-ringed parakeets, and had red beaks with yellow tips. The adults had yellowish-white eyes encircled by a ring of light grey. The Alexandrine parakeet is named in honour of Alexander the Great, who is credited with introducing this bird from India into European countries.

Rose-ringed parakeets or the *Kanthi tota* had vibrant green feathers, lovely red beaks and greenish-grey feet. They also had a long tail that made up a large portion of their total length. The upper side of the middle tail-feathers were blue with greenish-yellow tips. The outer feathers were green. The adult male

The Parakeets were quite destructive, really. The most destructive were the largest of the three –the voracious Alexandrine parakeets or the Hiramon tota.

Parakeets had two toes pointing forward and two toes behind. This arrangement of toes allowed them to climb the branches marvellously well.

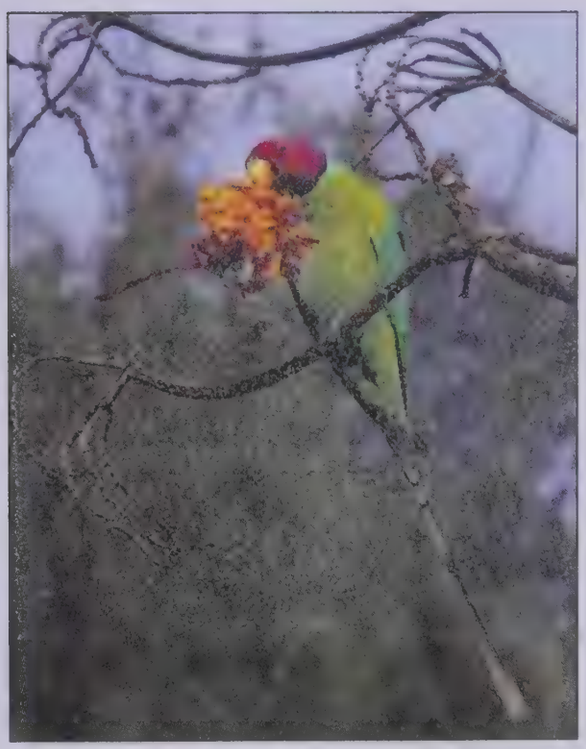
Rose-ringed parakeet sported a small black ring around the neck. The neck-ring was bordered with pink/orange coloured feathers. However, the female either had no neck rings, or only a shadowy pale grey/emerald coloured neck ring. Since juveniles took time to develop their neck rings, Mrs Milvus Cheel had no trouble in identifying the chicks.

These Parakeets had two toes pointing forward and two toes behind. This arrangement of toes allowed them to climb the branches marvellously well. They had a sidling gait which was very nice to see and they also used their beaks to gain leverage. They liked fruits, nuts, berries and seeds. So, the Silk cotton tree in flower was a favourite

Rose-ringed parakeet

haunt. Unfortunately, they squawked almost incessantly. Mrs Milvus Cheel got a headache if they stayed too long on the tree. And till the wind swept these away, the ground under the tree remained littered with bits of petals that the Parakeets had torn off the flowers.

The most beautiful Parakeet, according to Mrs Milvus Cheel, was the playful Plum-headed parakeet or *Tuinya tota*. The male had a beautiful magenta coloured head while the female's head feathers were a dull lavender-grey. The male also had a magenta shoulder patch on its wings, which the female lacked. The male had an orange coloured beak which contrasted brilliantly with the coloured head and green body. The beak of the female was less vivid; being more yellowish in colour. The males also had a narrow black neck collar and a black chin stripe which were not present in the females. Immature birds had green heads and yellowish beaks. The tails of Plum-headed parakeets accounted for about two- thirds of the length of these birds. Their *tooi-tooi-tooi* call was more musical than the harsh squawking of the other two species of Parakeets. However, this colourful Parakeet rarely lingered for long on the tree. They loved shredding the Marigold flowers growing



Male plum-headed parakeet

The most beautiful Parakeet, according to Mrs Milvus Cheel, was the playful Plum-headed parakeet or Tuinya tota.

Female plum-headed parakeet

In the process of sucking nectar, these tiny birds had also become excellent agents of pollination.

in the lady's garden and eating the seeds. Instead of getting angry at this plunder of her flowers, the lady usually ran to get the small box that emitted lightning flashes. Mrs Milvus Cheel had noticed that she seemed very pleased whenever the Plum-headed parakeets visited her garden.

The Purple sunbird couple was a particular favourite of the Cheel couple. In his breeding plumage, the male appeared all black except when sunlight hit his feathers. Then, the incredible purple iridescence dazzled all who looked at him. His mate was dowdier. She had olive-coloured feathers above and yellowish ones below. But it looked as if she had applied eye liner to her eyes with rather dramatic results.

The flashy metallic blue plumage of the male caught everyone's attention when the couple flitted delicately from flower to flower, sipping the nectar through curved, needle-sharp beaks. Because of this habit, these are called *Mou-chushi* (nectar –sucker) in Bangla and *Phool sunghani* (flower-smeller) in Hindi. In the process of sucking nectar, these tiny birds had also become excellent agents of pollination. However, once the breeding season was over, the male Purple sunbird would change his plumage. The dark

and shining feathers would be replaced with dull olive-ish ones, similar to the female's, but he would have a dark blue throat stripe. This was called his eclipse or non-breeding plumage.

The Purple sunbirds were restless birds and had a swift flight. They could take nectar by hovering like a Hummingbird, though they liked to perch and feed too. Many mistook them to be Hummingbirds; but there are no Hummingbirds in India.

The male cheeped continuously making a pleasant *chiwat-chiwat* sound even as he flitted about sipping nectar from the flowering Laburnum tree. He kept on fanning out his tail and fluttering with partly open wings, showing off

Many mistook them to be Hummingbirds; but there are no Hummingbirds in India.

Female sunbird

Male sunbird in breeding plumage

It is good that the female Purple sunbird is dull in colour, thought Mrs Milvus Cheel to herself.

his beautiful colouration, to attract the female's attention. His colouration was really attention grabbing.

However, no one really noticed the female Purple sunbird even when she was busy finding material to construct her purse-shaped nest. The nest itself was a marvel of construction. It was incredible to observe just how much hard work it was, thought Mrs Milvus Cheel to herself. The tiny birds painstakingly ferried feathers, dried leaves, cobwebs, bits of bark, lichens and cotton filaments to create their nursery that they built suspended from a low branch. They even topped off the structure with a broad leaf placed strategically, rather like a sloping roof. It had one entrance in the front through which the adults entered and left.

It is good that the female Purple sunbird is dull in colour, thought Mrs Milvus Cheel to herself. Only she incubates the eggs so it would not do for her to attract too much attention to herself as she sat on her eggs. If a predator caught her, it would mean the end of the chicks too. It was likely that with only one parent to care for them, the chicks would starve to death. No, it was a good thing that most female birds were dowdy as compared to the colourful males. Take

the Peacock for example, thought Mrs Milvus Cheel with a shake of her head. What a ridiculously long tail it has. A Peahen would never get any work done if she had to take care of such a long tail.

Preening is the process by which birds groom and care for their feathers. It is a grooming activity to remove dust, dirt and parasites from the feathers. Preening allows birds to arrange each feather in the best position. Most birds have a preen gland near the base of the tail. It produces an oily substance. While preening, birds spread this oil on their feathers to make these flexible and waterproof. Preening is an important activity for all birds. All birds preen. Those birds that stay in social groups often preen one another; it helps them to bond better.

Preening is the process by which birds groom and care for their feathers. It is a grooming activity to remove dust, dirt and parasites from the feathers.

Preening like parent

Mrs Milvus Cheel was also happy that her mate, Mr Milvus Cheel shared all domestic duties with her.

Mrs Milvus Cheel preened in a contented manner. Preening kept her feathers in order and in good health. She used her beak to tuck in any feather that was standing out at an awkward angle. She remembered the first time Jats had preened his feathers. His eyes had closed with pleasure as he had mimicked her actions. It had made the lady smile as she clicked on the box she pointed at him.

I have seen furry animals care for their furs in the same way that we care for our feathers, thought Mrs Milvus Cheel. That pesky Squirrel is always grooming his fur. He uses his tongue and teeth to comb away little snarls and to keep his fur looking sleek and cared-for. She shuffled happily on her perch; her well-preened feathers felt most comfortable.

Mrs Milvus Cheel was also happy that her mate, Mr Milvus Cheel shared all domestic duties with her; be it incubating the egg or getting food for the chick. For almost two months, they had worked together raising Jats, their first chick. Next year, they would raise more chicks. They were a closely bonded couple. If no accident separated them, they could stay together for life. They were part of each other's lives and would remain so for many years.

Both male and female kites help each other

There were some visitors that Mrs Milvus Cheel liked. These included the Indian white eye. These birds also fed daintily, sipping the nectar through their delicate beaks. The Indian white eye was tiny; about the size of the Purple sunbird. It had yellowish feathers on its upper parts, lighter coloured feathers on the abdomen and yellow throat and vent. But the most distinctive feature was a white eye ring as if someone had painted a bullseye around its eyes. No wonder in Bangla, it was called *Choshma pakhi* or the bespectacled bird! In Hindi, it was called *Motichur* or *Babuna*. This bird not only liked nectar, but also small insects. It had a restless nature and never stayed still for long, often diving into the Rangoon creeper to hide. Then it settled contently to preen uninterruptedly or to snap up an unwary insect. It almost never descended to the ground unless it was to drink water that the lady put out for the birds.

Most of all, the Indian white eye liked bathing in the dew or rain drops that had collected on the leaves. Mrs Milvus Cheel had often observed that the Indian white eyes spent long moments bathing after the humans had watered the henna hedge. They could make a drop of water go a long way. It was strange that most humans did not even spare a glance to

Indian white eye

But the most distinctive feature was a white eye ring as if someone had painted a bullseye around its eyes.

The idea of swallowing birds in a gulp reminded Mrs Milvus Cheel of the small, grain-eating birds called House sparrows.

appreciate how much these tiny birds enjoyed frolicking in the droplets. Mrs Milvus Cheel had heard that these birds sometimes stole nest material from the nests of other birds. So she kept a sharp lookout. I must admit they never took anything from my nest she thought happily. I'd have swallowed the couple in a gulp had they tried!

The idea of swallowing birds in a gulp reminded Mrs Milvus Cheel of the small, grain-eating birds called House sparrows. These chirpy and cheerful birds had slate-coloured crowns. Their upper backs were covered with catechu coloured feathers. The abdomens were covered with off-white feathers. The males were brighter in colour than the females. Males had a grey crown with chestnut sides, white cheeks,

Male sparrow

black bib, and reddish-brown back that was streaked with black. Females and juveniles had lighter colouration and lacked the black bib. House sparrows had stout bills suitable for picking grains.

Sparrows were very sociable, alert and cheeky. There was a time when these birds were numerous and many a tasty snack they had made for cheels everywhere. In Hindi these birds are called *Gauriya* and also, *Chiriya*. So numerous had the *chiriya* been, that the word was used to refer to all birds!

However, it had been months since Mrs Milvus Cheel had seen even one of the members of the noisy little colony that lived in the Rangoon creeper that was slowly creeping up the wall of the house. Mrs Milvus Cheel sometimes wondered where they had gone. More often she wondered where they nested, with their habitats being destroyed, and what they ate. There were few, if any, grain producing grasses growing naturally in cities any more. The lady who watched Cheel Ghar also put out bowl of *Bajra* and *Jowar* but the greedy, and much larger, Pigeons did not leave any for the smaller Sparrows.

For that matter, when had been the last time Mrs Milvus Cheel had seen the family of White-rumped munia? These

Mrs Milvus Cheel sometimes wondered where they had gone. More often she wondered where they nested, with their habitats being destroyed, and what they ate.

There are no wild grasses left here anymore, thought Mrs Milvus Cheel. Perhaps, that is why, the Munias have left.

seed-eating birds were about the size of Sparrows and had similarly shaped beaks. Mrs Milvus Cheel used to sometimes spot small flocks feeding on grass seeds. What had first held her attention was the way the flock flew. Each bird rose and fell in flight in such a way that it seemed as if the entire flock was undulating. There are no wild grasses left here anymore, thought Mrs Milvus Cheel. Perhaps, that is why, the Munias have left.

Or maybe humans had trapped the flock and put them in cages. Mr Milvus Cheel had once seen a cage full of fluttering Munias. One of these had been dyed a bright green, which gave it a peculiar look. I would die if I were kept in a cage, thought Mrs Milvus Cheel. What a cruel thing to do: to imprison a bird. Birds are made to soar unfettered. We are designed to fly free; to sing

White rumped munia

unrestrainedly. The sky is our address. Why should we be forced to live in cramped cages...or even big ones? They will need big cages to imprison us, she consoled herself. Cheels are large birds. We are too big to be kept in cages inside human residences.

She spread her wings in the Sun enjoying the warmth on her feathers. The parasites that lived in her feathers did not like the heat so much and often dropped off. That is why many birds like to sun-bathe and others liked to roll about in dust or sand heated by the Sun.

We are among the largest commonly seen birds here, realized Mr Milvus Cheel a trifle proudly. Us, the Cheels and the Oriental honey buzzards, that I have sometimes met, are really big birds. But then, we are distant cousins of sorts although their head does look a little pigeon- like.

The Oriental honey buzzard, called *Shahutela* or *Madkare* in Hindi, is a large and slender Kite with variable plumage. It has scale-like feathers around the eyes and forehead to protect it against the stings of the Wasps and Bees it feeds on. It has a grey head, and a greyish-brown body. The colour of the under-body ranges from cream to blackish-brown and tends to be streaked or mottled.

Oriental honey buzzard

Us, the Cheels and the Oriental honey buzzards, that I have sometimes met, are really big birds.

Ashy prinia

Sun-bathing is wonderful, thought Mrs Milvus Cheel, her eyes closing as she dozed off.

The pigeon-like head helps to identify this bird. A solitary bird, it treasures its freedom and usually takes shelter in foliage, rarely venturing into the open.

Sun-bathing is wonderful, thought Mrs Milvus Cheel, her eyes closing as she dozed off. Mrs Milvus Cheel too appreciated her freedom and her free time.

Thankfully, the Ashy prinia still lived happily and in complete freedom in the tangles of the henna hedge. Some called it the Ashy wren-warbler. In Hindi, it is called *Futaki*. True to its name, the Ashy prinia had ash coloured feathers on the top of its head and on its back. The long tail was rust coloured as were parts of the wings. Its belly was whitish but streaked with shades of light rust. It usually held its rufous coloured tail upright and hopped around on strong legs. It sang so cheerfully every morning that it gladdened the hearts of all listeners.

This diminutive insect-eater flew jerkily between the hedge and the Silk cotton tree. It amused the Cheel couple to observe that the birds barely landed before taking off again. The poor lady in the balcony kept pointing the box-like device in her hand first at the hedge, then at the Silk cotton tree and then, back to the hedge again. She usually got all hot and flustered after a while. Mr and Mrs

Milvus Cheel kept a mental count of how many fruitless to and fro movements the lady made before she gave up.

The Tailorbirds or *Darjin* were tiny birds with a very loud call. They were exactly the same size as the Ashy prinia and just as restless and lively. Mrs Milvus Cheel could never keep track of these tiny birds that constantly flitted from flower to flower, calling loudly as they did so. For such a small bird, the call of the Tailorbird's voice had incredible carrying power; being audible for up to 300 metres.

Called *Tuntuni* in Bangla, Tailorbirds were celebrated in Bangla folk lore. Generations of children had grown up hearing *Tuntuni* stories but it is doubtful if they could identify one if they saw it.

Tailorbirds had mossy green upper body feathers, long upright tail with rust coloured foreheads and crowns. There was a short black line on the throat. Since it carried its tail in an erect position, much like a flag-bearer carries the pole; it was called *Dhwaj-dhani* or flag-carrier in Sanskrit.

Tailorbirds are called tailor-birds because they sew the edges of leaves with plant fibre to make a cradle in which they build their nest. They like broad leaves such as those of the Fig, Mango or the Canna lily. They use spider silk or fibres

Tailorbirds are called tailor-birds because they sew the edges of leaves with plant fibre to make a cradle in which they build their nest.

Tailorbird

Startled, she looked up to see that a huge flock of Rosy pastors or Gulabi mynah had descended on the Silk cotton tree.

from the seeds of the Silk cotton tree to stitch the sides of the leaves to make their cup-shaped nest. In Sanskrit, they are also called *Putini* or *Protiyak,* which means one who makes pouches...and their nests are really small and pouch-like. Well, a tiny bird needs a tiny nest. We need a Cheel Ghar, thought Mrs Milvus Cheel looking with pride at her big nest. Big enough for the three of us to land on, she noted, quite pleased with herself.

Suddenly, she sensed a slight shudder run through the branches. Instinctively and immediately, she braced herself. Startled, she looked up to see that a huge flock of Rosy pastors or *Gulabi mynah* had descended on the Silk cotton tree.

Rosy pastor

They were pale strawberry pink coloured, medium-sized birds with black marks on their wings. They had black heads and black tails. Their black heads made them look as if they were wearing masks. If you look at them from the back, it looks as if they are wearing zipped up pink and black dresses, Mrs Milvus Cheel thought naughtily. Excited males had a wispy crest on their heads that could be raised or lowered. Mrs Milvus Cheel found it slightly comical, particularly as the throats of males bulged a bit when they sang.

Chattering non-stop, the Rosy pastors soon began feeding greedily on whatever they could find to fatten up before they embarked on their long journey back to Eastern Europe. They enjoy winters but not the summer when the Sun is too strong, observed Mrs Milvus Cheel. The children playing cricket under the tree never bothered to look up; not even to locate the sound of the sudden loud chatter. The visitors from a distant land ignored them too.

By April end, all the Rosy pastors would have left! However, now they were all over the Silk cotton tree. Sometimes the eager visitors inched too near the nest for comfort. Then, Mr Milvus Cheel would swoop down from his high perch

Kites like sun-bathing

They enjoy winters but not the summer when the Sun is too strong, observed Mrs Milvus Cheel.

Take over attempt

and scatter them. A cloud of terrified Rosy pastors would erupt from the bare branches, hang over the tree for a second and then, in a synchronized movement, simply wheel off into the blue sky. It was quite a sight. Mr Milvus Cheel would screech a little, puff out his feathers, circle overhead for a bit and then resume his position as sentinel on a nearby rooftop; quite chuffed at having impressed his mate with his vigilance.

The Coral tree clothed in a dense cluster of bright crimson flowers looks so spectacular that it has been described as one of the gems of the floral world. With Jats having grown up and the nest being empty, the Cheel couple had time to look around and take note. The ornamental Indian coral tree bore brilliant red blossoms in April as if to celebrate spring. It almost compensated for the fact that the Silk Cotton tree had lost all its red flowers.

Since Jats was not in Cheel Ghar anymore, there was also no reason to panic if other birds came too close for comfort. Mr Milvus Cheel looked on almost affably at the migrant birds still feeding greedily. However, you just couldn't afford to relax or stop being vigilant when you are raising your chick, thought Mr Milvus Cheel to himself.

Since Jats was not in Cheel Ghar anymore, there was also no reason to panic if other birds came too close for comfort.

He was most wary about the House crows or the Common crows, called *Kaua* in Hindi. He would chase away every single one, the moment he sighted it. These intelligent, highly sociable and noisy birds were scavengers. They would eat almost everything, from left-overs, offal, carrion, kitchen scrap, small Lizards, even baby Squirrels and fledgling, to fruits and seeds. Crows were also notorious for stealing and eating eggs. These were intelligent birds with a large repertoire of sounds suitable for different situations. He conceded that with glossy black feathers and grey collar and belly, Crows were actually very handsome. But their big black bills and strong toes could cruelly tear a young bird apart to enjoy it as a tasty morsel. Mr and Mrs Milvus Cheel took no risks where their family was concerned.

The Cheels did not mind chasing the Crows long distance to make sure that these birds did not pose a danger to their chick. It was quite a sight to see the Crow try all sorts of aerial acrobatics to dodge the determined Cheels in hot pursuit. Actually, the Cheels never did to the Crows what the Crows did to the poor Spotted owlet the other day...harass it.

Usually, the small Spotted owlet or *Ullu* hid in cavities in trees during the

He was most wary about the House crows or the Common crows, called Kaua in Hindi. He would chase away every single one, the moment he sighted it.

Common crow

Spotted owlet

The Cheel couple often heard its harsh call in the evening, just after sunset, or early dawn.

day. It had grey-brown feathers on the upper parts of the body. It had a pale facial disc and deep golden yellow eyes. The Cheel couple often heard its harsh call in the evening, just after sunset, or early dawn. They knew it was a sign that the Spotted owlet was up and about. The call was a chuckling sound. It sounded like *chirurr-chirurr-chirurr* and ended with *chirwak-chirwak*. When disturbed, these Owlets bobbed their heads and stared at intruders as if greatly surprised by their presence.

Well, the day Jats had his accident was memorable also because the Crows had spotted a Spotted owlet during the day time. They flocked around it and harassed it by cawing loudly. Those braver than the others, or those wanting to show off, made darting advances in the direction of the poor surrounded Owlet, which appeared more bewildered than usual.

A group of Crows is called a *murder* and that day it did seem that the Crows would murder the Owlet. They mobbed it from all directions till it did not know which way to turn. It peered short-sightedly at them and made bobbing movements with its head but did not attempt to fly away. Perhaps the strong sunlight disoriented it or maybe the sight

of so many Crows un-nerved it. It was only moments away from being pecked to death.

Had it not been for the lady who came out to investigate what the commotion was about, the Owlet would have been seriously injured that day. The lady ran towards the Crows that scattered at her arrival. The Spotted owlet spotted an opportunity to escape and made straight for its home in the cavity of a Jamun tree where it ducked down out of sight.

The lady knew that predatory birds such as owls and owlets represent a threat for many birds. Individually these small birds do not stand a chance against the larger, predatory birds. So they cooperate to drive away predators. Driving away predators increases their chances of survival and reproduction. Because a large group is involved, the risk to each group member is reduced; and all cooperating birds benefit. Still, she could not bear the idea of standing by and watching the owlet being mauled.

Thankfully the larger Jungle crow or *Kala (Pahari) kaua* was a rarer visitor because it preferred wooded habitats. It was glossy black all over. Its bill was thicker too. For this reason some called it Large-billed crow or Thick-billed crow. Like the Common crow, it also ate

Jungle crow

Jungle crow or Kala (Pahari) kaua was a rarer visitor because it preferred wooded habitats. It was glossy black all over.

Male Asian koel

The Kite couple knew that the breeding season of the Asian koel coincided with that of the Crow.

everything edible, be it fruits, flowers, seeds, insects or carcass. It was fearless and curious. It had the reputation of being a better robber of eggs than the Common crow. Both Mr and Mrs Milvus Cheel distrusted its intentions and became extra vigilant when it was around.

The birds which do not construct their own nests and deposit eggs in the nests of other birds are called Brood parasites.

The Kite couple knew that the breeding season of the Asian koel coincided with that of the Crow. Koels never build nests or looked after their young. They merely found a nest that other birds had built and laid their eggs in it. In this way they fooled the Common crow, Jungle crow and many other birds. Of course, they were smart enough to wait till the Crow had laid its eggs in the nest first. Otherwise, the Crow would have known that the eggs did not belong to it. Then, with stealth and speed, the female Koel picked up one of the Crow's egg in her beak. She laid her own egg in the nest and flew away with the Crow's egg. It was not that the Crows did not know about the Koel's strategy. Ever so often, the Koel would be caught in the act and it would be bedlam! The angry Crows could be seen chasing the Koel all over the neighbourhood. The female

Koel often took advantage of the Crow's absence from the nest and sneaked back to lay her egg even as the male Koel led the crows a merry chase. Once she laid her egg, the female Koel would call very loudly to signal that she had succeeded in her mission. The male Koel would then stop leading the crow further away from its nest. They were a very smart couple and they outfoxed the poor crows every time.

The Cheel couple had often seen the female Koel in action and knew that she took just a few seconds to do all this. In the Crow's nest, as young birds, the Koels fed on a variety of insects, caterpillars, and eggs. They cawed in a hoarse voice. However, as adults they usually ate only fruit and sang sweetly. The Cheel couple marvelled at this difference in behaviour. The Koel chicks have to pretend to be Crows or else the Crows will stop parenting it, Mr Milvus Cheel told his mate one day.

From a distance, the adult male Asian koel looked like a slender Crow. It was jet black but had ruby red eyes. The beak, legs and feet were pale grey. The female had a brownish crown with reddish streaks on the head. She was heavily striped and spotted. The striations broke up her outline and

Female koel against berries

The female Koel often took advantage of the Crow's absence from the nest and sneaked back to lay her egg even as the male Koel led the crows a merry chase.

Mr Milvus Cheel had sometimes wondered why the Crows did not spot the substitution of eggs.

helped her to blend in the shadows. Koels had long tails and they flew swiftly with quick wing beats. They were shy birds that liked to hide behind dense foliage, particularly when Crows were in hot pursuit. Their persistent and loud *ku-OO ku-OO* call was incredibly musical. The female sometimes made a shrill *pik.... kik-kik-kik...* call. Mrs Milvus Cheel often thought that was the female's way of saying, I have laid it...it...it.

Baby koel and Crow chicks

Mr Milvus Cheel had sometimes wondered why the Crows did not spot the substitution of eggs. Then one day, when flying above a Crow's nest, he noticed that the eggs of both the Koel and the Common crow were of the same size and had similar brown specks and streak marks on them. No wonder, the Crows never realized that they had been duped. They incubated the Koel's eggs and raised the young as their own.

In a way, Mr Milvus Cheel was happy that the Koels destroyed the eggs of Crows and laid eggs in the Crow's nest. That way fewer Crows were hatched. But Mrs Milvus Cheel disagreed. She pointed out that the Crow couple worked hard to make their nest. So what if it was a higgledy piggledy sort of a nest? The sticks, twigs, wires, and odd bits of cloth or fibres were collected with a great deal of effort.

The Crow parents took turns to sit on the eggs under a scorching summer Sun till the eggs hatched. They also foraged widely to bring food back to arise the chicks. They taught the chicks to fly. All this was hard work. Mrs Milvus Cheel rated the Crows as good parents. She considered the Koels to be nothing more than social parasites. She always called out scornfully whenever she heard the melodious *kuu..kuuu...kooo* of the Koel. Mr Milvus Cheel, on his part, always looked out to see if the Crow had managed to spot the Koel and whether it was being chased away.

Mr Milvus Cheel was also suspicious about the Common mynahs although he had never seen them steal eggs. These birds had chocolate brown feathers on the body, black hooded head and a bare yellow patch behind the eye. Their bills

Crows are good parents

The Crow parents took turns to sit on the eggs under a scorching summer Sun till the eggs hatched.

Common mynah

Their wide repertoire of calls could be bewildering for a novice birdwatcher.

and legs were bright yellow. There was a white patch on the wing, which was very prominent when the wings were outstretched. The edges of their tails were trimmed in white. Very vocal, this quarrelsome bird could croak, squawk, chirp, click and whistle. A variety of sharp calls were made with a comical bobbing of the head. Their wide repertoire of calls could be bewildering for a novice birdwatcher. It sometimes confuses even me, thought Mr Milvus Cheel, feeling quite amused. They were very bold too and did not seem to be afraid of anything, not even the humans about whom most birds were wary. Like Crows, these birds fed on almost anything edible; be it spiders, insects, worms, crustaceans, reptiles, kitchen waste, seeds, or fruits.

Their cousins the Jungle mynah, the Pied mynah and the Bank mynah sometimes visited the area near Cheel Ghar as they foraged for food.

The reason why Common mynahs were so successful was that they ate just about anything. Plus they were not fussy about where they nested. They nested on top of electric poles, in small holes in walls and even in places where other birds would feel insecure because of proximity to humans. They used anything that was locally available to build their nests; even

plastic packets discarded by humans. Therefore, these birds did not lack for anything, neither food nor shelter.

Mr Milvus Cheel knew that these birds, like the Crows, were opportunistic feeders. He had been determined not to give them a chance to rob his nest... and semi-grown Jats was proof that he had succeeded. Now, if only Jats would not try to fly before his flight muscles developed. But chicks never paid attention to parental warnings, thought Mr Milvus Cheel keeping an eye open for Jat's next misadventure.

The Cheel couple also kept a sharp eye on the Asian pied starling or Pied mynah. In Hindi, it was called *Safed* (white) mynah. It was a strikingly coloured bird dressed in black and white feathers. It had a yellowish bill with a reddish bill base. The bare skin around the eye was reddish. The upper body, throat and breast were black while the cheeks, wing coverts and rump were dazzlingly white. They were pretty vocal birds that could make a host of sounds ranging from whistles to trills, buzzes, clicks, and warbling calls.

Their nest was a towering dome made up of straw or dried twigs with an entrance on the side. These birds liked to build their nests on trees, but did not

In Hindi, it was called Safed (white) mynah. It was a strikingly coloured bird dressed in black and white feathers.

Pied mynah

The Brahminy mynahs or Harbolas were not so bad. This bird was very attractively coloured with black, brown, white and saffron coloured feathers.

mind building their nests on electric poles or other man- made structures close to human habitation either. Mr Milvus Cheel had often observed these birds as they foraged on open ground. He saw that although primarily insect feeders; these birds did not mind an occasional sip of nectar. They sometimes came to the Silk cotton tree to catch insects and drink nectar. And whenever they did, Mr Milvus Cheel went into alert-mode.

The Brahminy mynahs or *Harbolas* were not so bad. This bird was very attractively coloured with black, brown, white and saffron coloured feathers. Its wings and tail were dark brown, and the tail was white tipped. The feathers on the rest of the body were saffron coloured. The black feathers on its head looked as if the bird had used hair gel and combed it

Brahminy mynah

back. Sometimes it raised its crest feathers a little which gave it a very agitated appearance. It had a yellow beak with a touch of turquoise at the base and yellow legs. It was basically an insect-eater with a taste for nectar. It often foraged on the ground feasting on both animal and vegetable matter. The Cheel couple did not mind its presence very much.

Mr Milvus Cheel remembered the first time Jats had stood on his two feet. He had been a little more than two weeks old, certainly not quite three weeks old then. He had immediately toppled over. His mother had been most concerned. However, the attempts to regain balance and efforts to stand up to get the food that the parents were bringing back, stood Jats in good stead. Soon he was able to stand up without falling down. Then he began to flap his wings…or what would be his wings. However, it wasn't till Jats was almost a month old that he learnt to stand firmly on his feet.

That's how the muscles develop, thought Mr Milvus Cheel. Nothing happens in one day. You have to keep practicing. You have to keep trying. And I, I have to remain ever vigilant, he thought, remembering how he had scared off the Indian tree-pie on more than one occasion.

Baby kite trying to balance

Soon he was able to stand up without falling down. Then he began to flap his wings…or what would be his wings.

The Rufous tree-pie had an attractive combination of colours. The main body was covered with cinnamon coloured feathers but the head was black.

The Indian or Rufous tree-pie, better known as *Mahalat* or *Mahatab*, was another species that Mr Milvus Cheel had his suspicions about. It was a large bird and it ate almost everything from small birds and bats to fruits. This made Mr Milvus Cheel extra vigilant. Baby Jats would have made a tasty mouthful for a hungry Rufous tree-pie.

The Rufous tree-pie had an attractive combination of colours. The main body was covered with cinnamon coloured feathers but the head was black. The long tail was bluish-grey tipped with black. The tail was quite long in proportion to its body; a fact that had propelled the tree-pie to the league of the top-ten 'long-tailed birds' in the world. The wing had a white patch. But it was the stout black bill with a hooked tip that made Mr Milvus Cheel very wary.

Rufous tree-pie

For all its beauty, the tree-pie had a harsh call that many said sounded like a vessel being scraped. In Bengal, they called him *Handi-chacha*...he who scrapes the cooking pot! But to be fair, when courting, the Rufous tree-pie could sound almost musical! In other parts of India, they also called him *Taka-chor* meaning someone who steals money. Crows and Magpies are known to be attracted to shiny things. Perhaps, a Tree-pie had once stolen a coin and the name had stuck!

Mr Milvus Cheel was not fooled by the tree-pie's beauty. He had seen it feed on fruits, seeds, invertebrates, small reptiles as well as on the eggs and young of birds. Once or twice he had seen this species target the tiny Tailorbirds and Sunbirds too. He had no intention of allowing this opportunistic feeder to prey on his chick. He always let out a shrill warning cry when he spotted it when he was on watch. Mrs Milvus Cheel did the same when she was on sentry duty.

Koob. Koob. Koob...the resonant call came from somewhere nearby and Cheel couple looked around sharply to see who was making such a noise. Then they relaxed. It was only the Lesser coucal that was invisible in the dense vegetation but hardly inaudible. The Lesser coucal

In other parts of India, they also called him Taka-chor meaning someone who steals money. Crows and Magpies are known to be attracted to shiny things.

It is called Mahoka in Hindi, Kuka in Bangla and Bharadwaj in Marathi. In Coorg, they call it 'Good Luck Bird' because sighting this shy bird is considered to bring good luck.

shared many of the same colours as the Rufous tree-pie, but it was a much larger bird with very different characteristics. It is called *Mahoka* in Hindi, *Kuka* in Bangla and *Bharadwaj* in Marathi. In Coorg, they call it 'Good Luck Bird' because sighting this shy bird is considered to bring good luck. Actually, it would be more correct to say that the sighting itself is proof of the bird watcher's good luck.

It was a strikingly coloured with a black head, body and tail. The wings were a rich chestnut in colour and provided a startling contrast. The eyes were like gleaming rubies and it kept up a resonant call as it foraged on the ground. You are a clumsy flier, aren't you, thought Mrs Milvus Cheel as she noted the difficulty with which the Lesser coucal lifted itself for flight. And even when you fly, you do not go very far, she noted. You prefer to hide in the shrubbery as you hunt insects

Lesser coucal

and small lizards but at least you take good care of your young and are not a Brood parasite, she nodded approvingly. The Cheel couple did not see the Lesser coucal very often for it was a shy bird so they did not know its habits very well.

However, Mr and Mrs Milvus Cheel knew the Rock pigeon or *Kabutar* quite well. There was no way they couldn't. These birds had practically taken over the neighbourhood. These lived, fed and bred in large flocks. They were much given to aggressive courtship displays. The males seemed to spend a large part of the day showing off before the females. The lady with the box seemed to spend a large part of her time shooing them out of her house. She never kept the windows open for very long and always waved a stick to drive away the Rock pigeons roosting on the ledge near her balcony. She also emptied the nests of eggs as soon as these were laid...much to the delight of the crows that breakfasted on them. It was clear she did not want Rock pigeons nesting in her house. However, the Rock pigeons never seemed to get the message and laid eggs just about anywhere...be it on the AC machine or in the flower pot. This year the lady had given it up as a bad job and had began to point her little box at the hatchlings.

It was clear she did not want Rock pigeons nesting in her house. However, the Rock pigeons never seemed to get the message and laid eggs just about anywhere.

Adult males had very prominent metallic green and purple iridescence on the neck. The iridescence on females was more subdued.

Pigeon with metallic green and purple iridescence on the neck

Mr Milvus Cheel did not like the Rock pigeons either. He found these birds to be very stupid, extremely clumsy and equally messy. These were dumpy looking birds, pale grey in colour with two black bars on each wing and with a broad black terminal band on the tail. Adults had dark bluish-gray head, neck, and chest. The eyes were reddish with a paler inner ring. The bare skin round the eye was bluish-grey. The bill was grey-black and the feet, reddish. The beak bore a white waxy structure called cere. Adult males had very prominent metallic green and purple iridescence on the neck. The iridescence on females was more subdued.

The Cheel couple watched amazed as the mother Pigeon thrust her beak down her nestling's throats. Is she going to eat them, they thought the first time they saw her do it. Then they realized she was feeding them Pigeon milk...a sort of nutritious secretion from her crop. It was not the sort of milk that Squirrel mothers fed their kits but it was a nourishing liquid nonetheless. The two squabs fought fiercely to get their mother to feed them and the one that had hatched first usually won. Tearing off a piece of meat, and offering the bite sized bit to Jats, Mrs Milvus Cheel had shaken her head in puzzlement at the Pigeon's diet.

As far as Mr Milvus Cheel was concerned, the only thing Pigeons could do, and he couldn't, was to drink water as if sucking it through a straw. Most birds take a sip of water and then throw back their heads to swallow it. The Rock pigeon could drink water without needing to tilt its head back to aid the water go down. Huh! Some trick, Mr Milvus Cheel always scoffed; his mate thought she detected a little envy in his attitude!

It was clear that Mr Milvus Cheel did not think very highly of Rock pigeons. He kept a close eye on the pathetic little nest that the Pigeon couple had constructed using a few Lily leaves. Mrs Milvus Cheel did not remind her mate that Rock pigeons were grain eaters who posed no real risk to the tiny inhabitant of Cheel Ghar. Although these birds were not predatory by nature, Mr Milvus Cheel always thought they were clumsy enough to trample the egg if they got anywhere near the nest. He simply would not allow them to come anywhere near the Silk cotton tree. But, Pigeons were tasty food, he conceded that much. Squabs would be a welcome addition to his diet!

The Cheel couple liked eating Pigeon flesh. How good it had been to be able to train Jats to use his beak to rip open a dead Pigeon. Soon Jats would be hunting

Rock pigeon

The Rock pigeon could drink water without needing to tilt its head back to aid the water go down.

For such delicate looking birds, they had sharp black beaks that could inflict serious damage on anyone threatening it.

Laughing dove

his own game! She looked proudly at Jats who was focussing on keeping his balance as the branch moved in the breeze. She was pleased to note that already the Doves seemed to look upon Jats with the same respect that they accorded his parents.

The Laughing doves, also known as *Chota padki*, were smaller than the Rock pigeons. They were reddish-brown in colour and had blue-grey feathers in the wings. The rump and tail edges were white. They had a collection of black spots on their throats. For such delicate looking birds, they had sharp black beaks that could inflict serious damage on anyone threatening it. But these birds, usually found in pairs, never sought confrontation, preferring to take to the wing if danger threatened.

Like Rock pigeons, these birds too did not mind nesting close to humans. They even nested on top of the rolled up *chiks* in balconies frequented by people. Laughing doves were very clean by nature, unlike their relatives, the Rock pigeons. These small Doves used their beaks to pick up the egg shells after their young had hatched and disposed of it far away. Since there was no fragmented eggshell lying around, most predators had no clue that a baby chick had hatched.

Their chicks made little or no noise, and stayed very still, particularly when human beings were close. This behaviour often allowed them to escape unnoticed, and thus unharmed.

The Eurasian collared doves, or *Dhawalo,* had pale, pinkish-grey or lilac coloured feathers. They also had a distinctive black neck collar, deep red eyes and reddish feet. Though related to the Rock pigeons, the Eurasian collared doves were more slender in built and more graceful in movement. These birds often had an enquiring look about them perhaps because of their habit of cocking their heads when looking at something. They made a soft cooing sound. Known to be gentle; these birds were actually quite aggressive. Mr Milvus Cheel had often seen them chase Crows away. He liked that. Anyone who drove away Crows and other intruders was an ally.

That is why, he also liked it when the slender-built Black drongo or *Thakurji* came to the Silk cotton tree. The most distinctive feature of the Black drongo dressed in glossy black plumage was its deeply forked tail. It had a tiny white dot near the base of its beak.

Maybe it was a good thing, thought Mrs Milvus Cheel, that the Black drongo did not nest nearby. It was such a fearless

Though related to the Rock pigeons, the Eurasian collared doves were more slender in built and more graceful in movement.

Eurasian collared dove

Jet black drongos were insect eaters and the Silk cotton flowers held little interest for them. So they did not come very often.

Jet black drongo

bird that it did not hesitate to dive-bomb any bird of prey that entered its territory. It even chased me once, she recalled preening her feathers as if in readiness for flight. No wonder it was sometimes called King crow; and smaller birds chose to build their nest in the vicinity of their nests. A patrolling Black drongo kept them safe too. This trait of the Black drongo has earned it the name *Kotwal* (Police Inspector) in Hindi and *Kaling*, meaning attacker, in Sanskrit. It is believed that it could fly through smoke caused by forest fires to feed on fleeing insects. Because it was thought to be able to fly through smoke, it was also called *Dhumyat* in Sanskrit.

But the glossy, Jet black drongos were insect eaters and the Silk cotton flowers held little interest for them. So they did not come very often. If they did visit, it was to hunt the insects that were drawn to the nectar and pollen-rich flowers. Then, it was pure joy to watch the master flier manoeuvre in the air.

Well, we birds are masters of the sky, thought Mr Milvus Cheel, a little smugly. I can fly pretty well myself. We can see so many things while flying overhead. Why, just the other day I flew over an avenue of Arjuna trees and discovered the Red-naped black ibis nesting on them.

The Red-naped black ibis is a large bird with a long, slender and curved beak. Although it is called Black ibis, its feathers are not jet black. Rather, these have a pleasing dark blue-green sheen. The adult has brilliant red papillae covering the skin on the top of its heads, quite like a skull-cap. Its legs and feet are brick-red. These birds frequent open and dry fields more than marshy areas. They build their nests high on the trees and most human beings walking on the roads have no idea about the avian activities taking place in the canopy of the trees.

Mrs Milvus Cheel agreed with this observation. Rather patronisingly she recalled that humans often mistook the Red-naped black ibis for Vultures. While the shape and colour may be similar, Vultures are unkempt-looking scavenger birds with bald heads and bare necks. They certainly do not have the red-skull cap! They have pale yellow, powerful but short, beaks. Vultures have pale eye rings. The feathers on their back and upper wings are brown, fading to cream on the underside. Besides we hardly see the Indian vulture any more, thought the Cheel couple sadly. Their population has crashed and their numbers are in serious decline. All the more reason to appreciate what little avian life is still

Although it is called Black ibis, its feathers are not jet black. Rather, these have a pleasing dark blue-green sheen.

Red-naped black ibis

The Yellow-footed green pigeons were related to the Pigeons and Doves too. But they were neither as aggressive as the Doves nor as messy as the Rock pigeons.

Yellow-footed green pigeon

around. After all, we birds are all related to one another...some are closely related; others are more distant, the Cheel couple thought. They would have been happy to know that captive breeding programmes had been initiated to make sure that the Indian vulture does not go extinct.

Mr and Mrs Milvus Cheel were sometimes slightly amused at how Rock pigeons and their cousins had colonized the neighbourhood. The Yellow-footed green pigeons were related to the Pigeons and Doves too. But they were neither as aggressive as the Doves nor as messy as the Rock pigeons. Locals called them *Hariyals*. Because they were fruit eaters, they preferred the *Ficus* and fig trees nearby. Stocky-looking birds, these had yellow, olive-green and ashy grey feathers with a lilac patch on shoulders. They also had a conspicuous yellow bar on the wings that sported black borders. These were shy birds with colouring that allowed them to blend in with the green leaves. However, their yellow legs and their habit on continuously flicking their tails in an upward and downward movement gave them away as they flocked to fruiting trees.

The Yellow-footed green pigeons had fleshy toes that helped them to grip the branches better. Their grip on the

perch was so strong that they could carry out acrobatics without losing balance. They could even feed with their heads pointing downwards. The bare branches of the Silk cotton tree did not give them the camouflage they liked. But they still visited it, if only to catch the Sun. They liked to sit high up on tall fruit-bearing trees and rarely descended to the ground, so few ever got to see their lovely purple coloured eyes. Only once did the Cheel couple see these birds come down to the ground. They had done so to catch a quick drink of water from a leaking tap. Looking at this uncharacteristic behaviour, the Cheel couple had realized how thirst overcomes innate wariness. Being quiet visitors, the Yellow-footed green pigeons never attracted the ire of Mr and Mrs Milvus Cheel.

Suddenly, Mrs Milvus Cheel's sharp sense of hearing picked up the sound of synchronized flapping of wings. She twisted her head to get a better look and was just in time to see a flock of Cattle egrets fly leisurely overhead. These social birds, also called *Surkhia bagula*, stayed, nested and fed in groups. Hunched-over and stocky-looking, Cattle egrets had white feathers all over their bodies and buff plumes that indicated it was breeding season. From her perch,

Being quiet visitors, the Yellow-footed green pigeons never attracted the ire of Mr and Mrs Milvus Cheel.

It was because of their proximity to cattle that they were sometimes referred to as Gai (Cow) Bagula in Hindi.

Cattle egret

Mrs Milvus Cheel could see just how they had folded back their long legs so that it would not interfere with flight. She noted also how close to their bodies they pressed their legs as they flew. Almost effortlessly they flew in formation over Cheel Ghar and soon disappeared over the horizon.

They always fly southwards at this time in the morning, observed Mrs Milvus Cheel. I have seen them in paddy fields and inundated grasslands. I think they are flying to a place where there are water bodies and fish. Of course, they might be flying to a pasture where Cows roam too, she added to herself. These were smart birds that snapped up insects disturbed by the movement of the large mammals. So they got a good meal without having to work very hard for it. It was because of their proximity to cattle that they were sometimes referred to as *Gai* (Cow) *Bagula* in Hindi. Anyway, they never ever came to the Silk cotton tree, just flew over head twice a day with clockwork regularity. However, they did come to explore the puddles that formed under the tree during the monsoons; but they never stayed very long.

Well, even if the Cattle egrets never descended on the Silk cotton tree, others did. The Large green barbet or *Hara*

(or *Bara*) *Basanta* came rarely; perhaps because it wanted to give a wide berth to the residents of Cheel Ghar. These birds were called *Basanta* because they began to sing as soon as spring was in the air; and *basanta* is Hindi for spring. These rather dumpy looking birds were a bright and vivid green in colour. They had terrific camouflage. It was difficult to spot them amongst the leaves. Even the Cheel couple with their terrific eyesight could sometimes fail to spot this bird hidden amongst the leaves. But its voice often gave it away.

The Large green barbets were plump birds with short necks, large heads and short tails. Adults had streaked brown heads, necks and breasts. That is why, some called them Brown-headed barbets. Their beaks were thick and reddish. Their eyes were surrounded by featherless skin that appeared to be orange in colour. Stiff bristles that looked like a moustache were present at the base of the bill. The conspicuous bristles which fringed their bills gave them their name. All Barbets liked to nest in holes in trees. The holes they made were geometrically precise circles in tree trunks; incredible considering that they used only their bills to chisel the holes.

These birds were extremely wary. Just

Large green barbet

The Large green barbets were plump birds with short necks, large heads and short tails

Closely related to the Woodpeckers, this shy bird spent a lot of time sitting on trees and singing a monotonous kuk...kuk... kuk...song.

Coppersmith barbet

a glimpse of a human being was reason for them to fly away. One reason why the Barbets never stayed very long on the Silk cotton tree was because the lady who watched Cheel Ghar, always got very excited when she spotted one. And who can blame her, thought Mr Milvus Cheel. It really was a feat to spot the Large green barbet because its colour blended perfectly with the green leaves. It was only because the Silk cotton tree was still bare that she could see him at all. Otherwise all she could hear was the *kuk-kuk-krruuk* sound that stopped as soon as she looked up to find the source. The sound resumed again only when she gave up. It was almost as if the bird took pleasure in taunting her, knowing it was near invisible; thanks to its green plumage.

The smaller Coppersmith barbets were even more infrequent guests. Called *Chota basanta* or *Gul badana* in Hindi, these diminutive, colourful and lively birds gave Cheel Ghar a wide berth. Closely related to the Woodpeckers, this shy bird spent a lot of time sitting on trees and singing a monotonous *kuk...kuk...kuk...* song. It got its name from the supposed similarity of its call to the sound of a coppersmith at work. Its Sanskrit name, *Dindi-manawak* meant a little drummer boy.

A vivid green body, red and yellow throat patches, and a red head pattern made it a strikingly beautiful bird. Some described it as wearing golden spectacles because of the yellow semi circles on top and bottom of the eyes. An insect eater, it also enjoyed feeding on the berries of the Peepul and Banyan trees. Like the larger Barbet, it also nested in the holes of tree trunks. Sometimes the Parakeets or the Common mynah would spot its hiding place and oust it before claiming the hole as its own.

I'd like to see any bird try and claim Cheel Ghar, thought Mrs Milvus Cheel a little aggressively. She was very confident that her beak and talons would foil any takeover bids. Perched nearby, Mr Milvus Cheel felt a ripple of amusement when he saw that the Common mynah and the pesky squirrel had begun to explore Cheel Ghar, now that Jats was no longer in residence. Their intention was clear. They were looking to salvage any material that they could use in their own nests.

Not likely, thought Mr Milvus Cheel. I spent a lot of time searching for the right stuff and expended a lot of effort in bringing it to Cheel Ghar. I won't allow anyone to rob us. He gave a warning shriek and the intruders dispersed in

Parakeet hiding behind peepul leaves

Like the larger Barbet, it also nested in the holes of tree trunks.

Grey hornbills were aptly named because they had brownish-grey feathers all over the body with a light grey or dull white belly.

Indian grey hornbill

a jiffy. Immediately, Mrs Milvus Cheel descended on Cheel Ghar and proceeded to make herself more comfortable. It was a gesture meant to re-establish her right over Cheel Ghar and to discourage any potential squatter.

However, not all visitors had nefarious intentions. Some paid very short visits; not even exploring the many branches of the Silk cotton tree. The Indian grey hornbills were occasional visitors. Locally, these were called *Dhanmar, Shingchoncha* or *Dhanesh*. Grey hornbills were aptly named because they had brownish-grey feathers all over the body with a light grey or dull white belly. They had long, white tipped tails with a dark band a little above the tip. They also had the most impressive beaks and prominent black eye-rings. Both the male and the female had outgrowths, called casques, on their beaks. However, the casques of the females were smaller than those of the males. How do they manage to feed with such cumbersome beaks, marvelled Mr Milvus Cheel sometimes when he spotted the Hornbills.

The Indian grey hornbill usually fed on fruits such as Figs and on insects and small Lizards, etc. Sometimes it liked to drink the nectar too; often twisting its body into yoga-like postures to get

to the flowers. Rarely did the Indian grey hornbill damage the flowers. The Parakeets should take lessons in dainty dining from the Hornbills, thought Mr Milvus Cheel with a smirk. It was amazing to see how agile such a big bird could be. Their flight pattern was quite distinctive too with wings being flapped before going into a glide while holding them in a 'V' position.

Mr Milvus Cheel looked at the Indian grey hornbill, in a fascinated way. The Cheel couple had heard that the Hornbills nested in cavities in tree trunks. This was usual for many birds. What was unusual was that the male walled in the female, along with the eggs, inside the hole in the tree trunk. He used mud to seal her in and left only a small hole through which he fed her. This kept the eggs and the hatchlings safe from predators. The Cheel couple had often wondered what would happen to the female and the young ones if humans killed the male Hornbill or if it met with an accident. That would be a catastrophe indeed.

Mr Milvus Cheel looked at his mate. Thankfully, I don't have to seal her up, he thought. For one I would need to get a whole lot of mud and that would get my beak all dirty. Besides, she eats quite a bit and I would have to spend all my time

The Cheel couple had often wondered what would happen to the female and the young ones if humans killed the male Hornbill or if it met with an accident.

The Red-vented bulbul was rather a vocal bird with distinct flute-like calls. It also had two distinctive alarm calls that most other birds also heeded.

Red-vented bulbul

getting food for her and not get any time to preen at all.

Peep! The sudden sound made Mr Milvus Cheel look up sharply. Almost immediately, he relaxed. It was only the Red-vented bulbul or *Guldum* bulbul. Bulbuls were medium-sized songbirds. The Red-vented bulbul had a short crest because of which its head looked squarish. The upper parts and breast were covered with dark sooty brown feathers. Each feather had a pale edge which gave it a 'scaly' appearance. Its black tail was tipped in white. The rump was white too but the vent was red; the reason behind its name. The Red-vented bulbul was rather a vocal bird with distinct flute-like calls. It also had two distinctive alarm calls that most other birds also heeded. These Bulbuls were regular visitors and both Mr and Mrs Milvus secretly enjoyed their songs. Even the Mughal Emperor Humayun had noted that it liked the nectar of the Silk cotton flowers. The Cheel couple knew from observation that it was true.

Its cousin, the Red-whiskered bulbul had similar colouration and size, but a more jaunty, almost military, appearance. No wonder, it was called *Sipahia* bulbul in Hindi. This was because it had a tall black-pointed crest on its head, and white

and red cheek patches with a long white-tipped tail.

Perhaps because of its strategically placed red patches, it was called *Srikarn* in Sanskrit. The word has two meanings. It means one whose ears are beautiful; and it can also mean one whose call is sweet to the ears. Both the meanings are apt. The song of the Red-whiskered bulbul is really very melodious.

Perhaps because of its strategically placed red patches, it was called Srikarn in Sanskrit.

Red-whiskered bulbul

This bird fed on insects, flower buds, fruits and nectar, and so visited the flower-laden Silk cotton tree quite frequently, flitting gaily from flower to flower. Liquid notes of pure music poured out of its beak as it perched on the branches. What a difference from the squawking Parakeets, thought the Cheel couple each time they heard this bird.

We'll vote for the Red-whiskered bulbul for the sheer pleasure of hearing it and the Eurasian hoopoe for its beauty, the Cheel couple often thought. But

The Eurasian hoopoe or Hudhud in Hindi, often confused with the Woodpecker by ignorant humans, had golden-buff coloured feathers on the head and neck.

the Eurasian hoopoe comes rarely these days, they acknowledged sadly. This bird is so distinctive that once you see it; you cannot forget it. Habitat destruction is taking its toll on all of us, thought Mr Milvus Cheel trying to remember when he had last met the Eurasian hoopoe.

The Eurasian hoopoe or *Hudhud* in Hindi, often confused with the Woodpecker by ignorant humans, had golden-buff coloured feathers on the head and neck. The head bore an attractive crest made up of feathers that gradually increased in length. These feathers were tipped with black, and had a yellowish-white bar near the end. However, the crest was erected usually only when the Hoopoe alighted or when it was alarmed. The wings were zebra-striped in black and white. The colours of the feathers

Eurasian hoopoe

on the chest varied from light-orangish to chestnut. It was this contrast between the colours of the body and that of the wings that made this bird appear so graceful. The blackish bill was long, thin and curved slightly downwards. Short, grey coloured legs supported the bird as it gently probed the ground looking for fat grubs. However, this gentle bird was often harassed by the bold Mynahs and the aggressive Crows.

There were at least three other birds the Cheel couple missed greatly. The first was the little Green bee-eater. The second was the absolutely gorgeous Golden oriole and the third was the White-breasted waterhen.

The Little green bee-eater or *Patringa* in Hindi, was a slender bird that was literally a riot of exquisite colours. It had bright bronze-green plumage tinged with blue on the throat and chin. The wings were tinted reddish-brown and had a black trailing edge. The green head was crowned with rich reddish-brown feathers. A narrow black stripe, called gorget, adorned its throat. Outer under-tail feathers were shiny grey, and median ones on the tail were long and purplish. The central pair of tail feathers were elongated like pins; a feature that identified these birds. There was a fine

Little green bee-eater

The Little green bee-eater or Patringa in Hindi, was a slender bird that was literally a riot of exquisite colours. It had bright bronze-green plumage tinged with blue on the throat and chin.

Vigilant kite

The Little green bee-eater had a trilling call, which sounded like... trree-trree-trree-trree-trree. It also had a short, sharp alarm calls that went ti-ti-ti.

black line in front of and behind the eye, rather like elegantly applied eyeliner, which enhanced the appeal of the gem-like red eyes. It had a thin, long, black bill that had a slight downward curve. The legs were blackish in colour. The juvenile was paler than the adult, and lacked the distinctive tail streamers and gorget.

These birds ate insects such as Butterflies, Crickets, Dragonflies but absolutely feasted on Honey bees. How surprised I had been, recalled Mr Milvus Cheel, when I had first seen the Little green bee-eater smack the captured Bee against the perch before swallowing it. I think it does that to get the sting to drop off. This means that these birds instinctively know that Bees can sting. Their behaviour ensures that they do not get stung. The Little green bee-eater had a trilling call, which sounded like... *trree-trree-trree-trree-trree*. It also had a short, sharp alarm calls that went *ti-ti-ti*.

The trilling sound of the Little green bee-eater is pleasant enough. But I much prefer the lovely fluting call of the Indian golden oriole, thought Mrs Milvus Cheel. Well, its song is almost the only proof of its presence because it is such a shy bird that almost no one ever gets to see it. Even we birds, sitting high up on a tree hardly ever get more than a glimpse of

this gorgeously golden coloured bird with black wings and spectacular black eye stripes. With dark grey legs, red eyes and pinkish bill, the colour combination is visually stunning. But we have to be very alert to even spot it as it simply flies swiftly past to hide in the dense leaves of tall trees, realized Mrs Milvus Cheel. Of course, in keeping with avian tradition, the females and juveniles are not as stunningly coloured; having yellowy-green and paler under-parts. Perhaps because the male is so intensely yellow (*Peela* in Hindi), these birds are locally called *Peelak*.

Mrs Milvus Cheel was a little affronted by the fact that the Indian golden oriole couple hardly ever came to the Silk cotton tree even when it was in flower and attracting lots of insects. Then she nodded to her mate. The Indian golden oriole is shy; it even nests near the Black drongo's nest for protection. Maybe our presence makes it uneasy. Mr Milvus Cheel was busy tucking an errant feather back in place and did not notice. However, this was a rare occasion because usually very little escaped his gaze.

The Cheel couple missed the White breasted waterhen that had all but disappeared from the area after a

Indian golden oriole couple hardly ever came to the Silk cotton tree even when it was in flower and attracting lots of insects.

Gone, all gone. Gone because the habitat is gone, thought Mrs Milvus Cheel sadly. We birds will all die out if our habitats are destroyed like this.

White breasted waterhen

freshwater drain or *nullah* had been covered up. Called *Jalmurgi, Dawak, Dahak,* or *Dauk,* in Hindi, these were dark, slate-coloured birds with white faces, necks and bellies. Their lower bellies and undertails were cinnamon coloured. The Cheel couple would often observe from their roost as the shy mother bird made its way along the edges of the drain, quietly exploring the vegetation for tasty tit-bits. It ate almost everything from worms, molluscs, insects, spiders and small fish to grass seeds, shoots and roots of marsh plants. Sometimes it held its tail upright and scurried along on yellowish-green legs that matched the colour of its beak. It would often be preceded and followed by its chicks. The chicks were covered in dark fuzzy feathers and looked like tiny fuzzy balls rolling along. How unfortunate that it had been a long time since any of these chicks had been sighted ! Gone, all gone. Gone because the habitat is gone, thought Mrs Milvus Cheel sadly. We birds will all die out if our habitats are destroyed like this. Yet even when mourning the passing of avian friends, she did not relax her vigil over Cheel Ghar.

The only non-bird visitor the Cheel couple firmly kept a sharp eye on was the striped Squirrel as it scampered up and

down the trunk of the Silk cotton tree, shrilly scolding everyone. It had a long and bushy brush-like tail, black beady eyes and an inquisitive nature. It also had dark stripes running down its back. Its drey was in a hollow on the trunk of a Gul mohur tree and there it was raising three kits. Mrs Milvus Cheel knew that it might try to eat her eggs if it got the chance. So she issued sharp warnings if it came too near. Sometimes she was tempted to grab it as a quick snack but somehow never got around to it.

Anyway, food was not a problem. There was a garbage dump nearby and all sorts of tasty tit bits could be found there. Sometimes Mice and Rats came to nibble on the food and it was easy to swoop down and catch them. The people who lived here also caught Mice in cages and released them near the dump. This disoriented the Mice and it was easy to pounce on them. On a lucky day, a Pigeon might be lunch and dinner too; so the Squirrel was safe for the time being.

Mrs Milvus Cheel shifted a little in the nest, looking for shade which wasn't there. The Sun was quite strong, even more so than it had been in March. In March, most of the birds rested under leaves or someplace cool waiting for evening to descend when they could

Anyway, food was not a problem. There was a garbage dump nearby and all sorts of tasty tit bits could be found there.

Gul-mohur tree

Mr and Mrs Milvus Cheel had taken turns to sit on the egg. It was a duty they carried out with unflinching devotion.

come out again. Mr and Mrs Milvus Cheel had taken turns to sit on the egg. It was a duty they carried out with unflinching devotion. They incubated the egg with the warmth of their bodies even as the hot Sun beat down on them.

The tree was bare. There were no leaves to provide even a hint of protection. Even then, the Cheel couple had not complained. Day after day, they had taken turns to incubate the egg. It would take almost a month before it would hatch. The only evident sign that they felt the heat was the flutter in their throats and the fact that their beaks were open, as if they were panting. Later, once the egg hatched, they knew instinctively

Kite chick being protected by parent

that Jats, being a young chick, was unable to regulate his body temperature. He was dependant on his parents to shade him from the Sun and to cover him if it rained. They kept him well-hidden and sheltered under their half-open wings.

Meanwhile, they watched with a wary eye the many other species of birds that came to the Silk cotton tree in search of food. Perhaps one of the most colourful ones was the Black-rumped flameback woodpecker or *Son-Kathfod* or *Sona Kaktola*. It had golden yellow feathers covering its back; hence the term *Sona* (gold) in its Hindi name. The head was whitish with a black nape and throat. It also had a greyish eye patch. Its under-parts were white with dark markings and the throat was finely marked with white. The adult male had a red crown and crest. It was often humorously described as having a Watermelon slice on its head because the red colour was so noticeable.

It had two toes pointing forward, and two backward which allowed it to have a firm grip on the tree. It used its stiff tail to provide support and its straight pointed bill to drum against the trunk of the tree. This flushed out insects. The bird then used its long tongue to sweep up the insects. Sometimes it would simply

Black-rumped flameback woodpecker

Perhaps one of the most colourful ones was the Black-rumped flameback woodpecker or Son-Kathfod or Sona Kaktola.

The new parents did not have to frighten the Shikra into leaving though. It left on its own, having paid no attention to them, Cheel Ghar or its latest inhabitant.

Male shikra

feast on the insects that came to drink the nectar of the Silk cotton flowers.

For such a pretty bird, it had a very harsh voice, thought Mrs Milvus Cheel who had very little to do except to brood the two pinkish-white eggs she had laid in late February. Our voices are not very sonorous either, she reminded herself. Better not point a claw at the Woodpeckers, Kingfishers, Peafowl and Tree-pies although these birds do have exceptionally harsh calls, she reprimanded herself.

Almost forty days after the eggs were laid, the first egg cracked. A small, naked and helpless baby bird emerged. Mrs Milvus Cheel remembered the moment clearly. She had moved away from the egg to allow the hatchling some space, when she had looked around to see at least three different species of birds watching her nest with evident interest. One shrill cry had been enough to send the Peeping Toms fleeing for their lives.

The new parents did not have to frighten the Shikra into leaving though. It left on its own, having paid no attention to them, Cheel Ghar or its latest inhabitant. The Cheel couple knew this small Hawk well because it often soared with them when they glided on the thermals looking for prey.

It was a hunter and had most probably dropped in on the Silk cotton tree while in hot pursuit of a prey. It merely sat on the branch for a moment or two and then took off swiftly with a short and sharp cry that sounded like *Kik-ki...kik-ki*. Maybe it had spotted a Garden lizard it would catch for lunch.

What a compact hunting machine it was, thought both the Cheels appreciatively. The Shikra's white under-parts bore brown striations, which were in beautiful contrast with the grey feathers that covered the back. The Shikra had short rounded wings with blackish tips and a narrow and somewhat long tail. This particular Shikra also had bright red eyes that gleamed like dark rubies. It also had blue-grey upper-parts, which indicated it was an adult male. In the female, the eyes were yellow. The feathers covering the upper-parts were more brownish grey in the females. The Shikra was an elegant bird.

Mrs Milvus Cheel had laid two eggs this year. Jatayu had hatched from the first one. The Cheel couple hoped that the other one would hatch soon, but it did not. It happened sometimes. Such eggs were called addled. Mrs Milvus Cheel soon realized it was a bad egg and gave up sitting on it. Then, Mr and Mrs

In the female, the eyes were yellow. The feathers covering the upper-parts were more brownish grey in the females.

Female shikra

Kite bringing food for the chick

There was no time to brood over the bad egg. Time passed in a fast forward mode. The chick was always hungry and very demanding.

Milvus Cheel forgot about it. They even trampled all over it without a thought.

There was no time to brood over the bad egg. Time passed in a fast forward mode. The chick was always hungry and very demanding. It seemed to the parents that they were simply taking turns to get enough food for the chick and providing protection from the strong Sun. It was hard work.

Sometimes at night a shrill call would wake the Cheel couple from the light sleep they indulged in with the chick in the nest. Woken suddenly Mr Milvus Cheel would half open his wings in an involuntary gesture, as if he were about to fly. Mrs Milvus Cheel would straighten her head and give a soft reassuring call. It was meant both for the chick and for her mate. It is just that Red-wattled lapwing, she said. Settle down. Ignore it. However, that was easier said than done. Its four note cry was so piercing that it could wake the dead. The call was very loud and sounded like a shrill...*did he do it... did he do it* and made the British dub it the *Did You Do It* bird. When she heard its call in the morning she often complained about it; not that the Red-wattled lapwing took any notice. If only it would not be so noisy at night,

thought Mrs Milvus Cheel, we really need our sleep...looking after the chick tires us out.

The Red-wattled lapwing, called *Titeeri* in Hindi, was a boldly coloured bird. It had greyish brown upper-parts with jet black head, neck and upper breast. A broad white stripe extended from each eye down the sides of the neck, creating a prominent demarcation between the black and brown plumage. Its tail was short and tipped black. It had a red fleshy wattle, or a wrinkled fleshy growth, in front of each eye. Its bill was red tipped with grey and its long legs were bright yellow. Males and females were similar in plumage but males had longer wing spans. The Red-wattled lapwings moved in jerky short spurts, stopping abruptly to catch insects. They always had a watchful stance. When threatened, these birds could run quite fast. Their flight was unhurried with deliberate flapping of wings. Interestingly, these birds remained alert, active and wide awake even at night.

There is a mistaken belief that Red-wattled lapwings sleep on their backs with their feet up in the air as if supporting the sky. This belief has led to the Hindi idiom, *Titeeri se asman thama jaega!* (Can the *Titeeri* support the heavens?) It is

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Red-wattled lapwing

Jats was defenceless. His talons were weak. His beak was yet to become a lethal weapon.

usually used for a person endeavouring to undertake a task that is absolutely beyond his abilities.

Looking after the chick was well within the abilities of the Cheel couple. Newly hatched Jats bore no resemblance to the majestic, chocolate coloured birds that were his parents. He had almost no feathers to speak of and his naked skin was puckered and shrivelled. Tiny eruptions marked the places where the feathers would grow. These lines marking the places along which future feathers would spurt are known as pterylae.

Jats was defenceless. His talons were weak. His beak was yet to become a lethal weapon. He was totally dependent on his parents for food and protection.

Mother kite feeding the chick

He seemed to know it too for he stayed crouched in the nest and no one could guess he had arrived...not even the lady with the box-like device. His parents shaded him with their bodies and took turns to get food for him

For such a small chick, Jats had a rather hearty appetite. He was always hungry and would gulp down any food that his parents presented to him. Initially, his parents tore the food into bite-sized bits for him to swallow. As he grew older, he learnt to tear off mouthfuls. Because his parents took such good care of him, Jats grew very fast. Soon he resembled a table tennis ball covered in wispy white feathers. His beak was evidently quite pointed and his eyes were bright. His personality was shining through and he felt bold enough to raise his head and take a look at the world outside.

It was funny, what happened the very first day that Jats decided to take his first peek at the world. That moment happened to coincide with the visit of the cacophonic Seven sisters. The Seven sisters were actually the Jungle babblers. These were brownish-grey birds with yellow bills, rather mean-looking yellow eyes and long tails edged with white feathers. They had slight mottling on their throats. The Jungle babblers were

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Because they made so much noise, they were not only called Babblers in English but also, Haholika in Sanskrit and Bhadbhadia in Gujarati.

Babblers

highly sociable and gregarious. They always hopped around in flocks of six to ten birds making a tremendous racket wherever they went. This had earned them the name Seven sisters, or *Saat* (seven) *Bhai* (brothers) or *Saat Saheli* (friends). Because they made so much noise, they were not only called Babblers in English but also, *Haholika* in Sanskrit and *Bhadbhadia* in Gujarati. They fed mainly on insects, roots and berries but they also enjoyed nectar. That is why they had descended *en masse* on the Silk cotton tree, loudly calling to each other.

Faced with sudden harsh calls, continual chattering, squeaking and chirping, Jats had immediately pulled his head back and crouched low in his nest. He cowered there the entire day, even after the noisy visitors had departed. Mrs Milvus Cheel remembered that she had exchanged amused looks with her mate. Jats would grow up into a big and brave bird and would be afraid of no one. But today, he was a chick. He was vulnerable. He was afraid. He had lots to learn and a long way to go before he could claim the sky as his own.

By mid-April the Silk cotton tree was almost completely bereft of its lovely flowers. But the flowers of the Flame of the Forest were setting the city afire. So

there was no dearth of red flowers on tall trees. The young leaves that had just emerged on the Coral tree were like pale, bronze-green velvet. The leaves would mature to take on the texture of leather. These were smooth above but hairy underneath, which gave them a silvery appearance from a distance. Scentless but colourful, the deep vermillion and orange flowers of the Coral tree had five petals each. Two of the petals were large, two were smaller and the fifth was curved into a beak-like shape. This beak-like petal or keel gave the tree its second name: Parrot tree. Sunbirds, Mynahs and Babblers greatly patronized this tree.

The first of the Gul mohurs also began to bloom by April end. Some trees bore flamboyant bright red flowers that contrasted marvellously with the green leaves. Other trees bore orangish flowers that looked equally striking against the green foliage. The flowers were large, with four spreading scarlet or orange-red petals. The fifth and largest petal was spotted with yellow and white flecks.

Once the flowers fell off, tiny soft, green pods appeared. These pods elongated and become black and hard. These strap-like pods remained dangling from the branches till the tree flowered again next year.

Bright red gul-mohur flower

The first of the Gul mohurs also began to bloom by April end. Some trees bore flamboyant bright red flowers that contrasted marvellously with the green leaves.

Neem leaves are deeply serrated, sharply pointed and curved like a scythe.

Parakeets brought their chicks out for short excursions because this tree afforded desirable shade. The green feathers and red beaks of the birds complemented the green leaves and red flowers of the tree most beautifully.

The ever-green Neem tree blossomed at this time and many insects such as bees were attracted to its flowers. This meant that insect-eating birds made a beeline for them. The tiny scented flowers were inconspicuous but anyone passing beneath the tree always sniffed appreciatively because a sweet scent permeated the air. Neem leaves are deeply serrated, sharply pointed and curved like a scythe. Young leaves were pale, tender green in colour with a hint of rust. Later when the fruit was ripe, the Neem tree received many avian visitors.

It was April when the Kite couple had a bit of luck. They found a dead White-breasted kingfisher or *Kilkila*, with its beak embedded in the trunk of the Silk cotton tree. This was a bit of a surprise because the Kingfisher rarely visited the tree. They had seen it often enough though, sitting on the electric wire nearby and heard its harsh cry too.

Although it was a Kingfisher it was not a specialist fish-eater. It preferred

Neem tree

to eat large invertebrates and smaller vertebrates such as the Garden lizard. The Cheel couple had noted that it could forage far from water. They had noted too that it was usually solitary and territorial.

It was a strikingly attractive bird with a harsh call. The adult had bright blue feathers on the back, wings and tail. Its head, shoulders, flanks and lower belly were covered with chestnut coloured feathers, and the throat and breast were white. It had a large red coloured bill. In flight, large white patches were visible on the blue and black wings. The bird was so spectacularly beautiful that in Sanskrit it was called *Chandrakant* meaning lustre of the Moon.

Its flight was rapid and direct. Mr Milvus Cheel thought he knew what had lured this pretty bird to its doom. He had seen the Kingfisher target the Oriental white eye in the past few days, probably as potential prey. Mr Milvus Cheel assumed that the Oriental white eye had proved to be too zippy for its pursuer, which had dashed against the tree and knocked itself out. Whatever the circumstances behind the accident, the Cheel family had a good feast. Jatayu learnt to use his beak and talons to dismember the carcass. It was good training for him.

The bird was so spectacularly beautiful that in Sanskrit it was called Chandrakant meaning lustre of the Moon.

White-breasted kingfisher

Indian white eye is a tiny bird

Mr and Mrs Milvus Cheel were more relaxed by mid-April. Food was abundant. The only problem they had was finding water to drink. However, people in the locality were kind and had set out large earthenware pots of water in which the smaller birds such as the Bulbuls and Babblers also bathed; if they could find one the Dogs had not lapped dry or were not using as a bath tub.

The tinier birds, such as the Indian white eye and the Tailorbird had impromptu rain dances after the humans watered their henna hedge. It was most amusing to see them behave just as they would have after natural rainfall.

The Cheels were too big to fit into these drinking bowls to have a bath. Nor could they dance with abandon. But they too relished a swig of cold water from time to time, especially when the merciless Sun beat down in summer. Well, every living creature needs water, mused Mr Milvus Cheel. I have seen a Squirrel and a Babbler drink from the same pot when thirst struck ...thankfully, there is no squabbling between mammals and birds over a drink of water.

And I have seen Wasps and Bees drop in for a sip of water, nodded Mrs Milvus Cheel.

By April-end, Jats was flying more

The tinier birds, such as the Indian white eye and the Tailorbird had impromptu rain dances after the humans watered their henna hedge.

confidently. Although he would need to turn two years old before he could find a mate and set up a nest for himself. His plumage was losing the speckled white look and assuming a more regular chocolate colour. His parents still brought him food regularly and enjoyed the feel of his beak tugging it from theirs. He returned often to Cheel Ghar and often slept in it too; particularly in the afternoons. He seemed to be aware now of his territory and his obligation to defend it. His parents were happy to note that he shrilly protested when the Oriental magpie robin landed a little too close for comfort. It was reassuring also to note that the Oriental magpie robin paid attention to the warning and respectfully moved away.

It was reassuring also to note that the Oriental magpie robin paid attention to the warning and respectfully moved away.

Male oriental magpie robin

Female oriental magpie robin

The Oriental magpie robins called Dahiyals/ Gwalins in Hindi, were good songbirds. The head, neck, breast, back and wings were black.

The Oriental magpie robins called *Dahiyals/Gwalins* in Hindi, were good songbirds. The head, neck, breast, back and wings were black. The graduated tail was white with a black band in the middle and the abdomen was white too. The male had a splendid glossy black and white appearance while the female was white and a washed out black in colour rather reminiscent of a faded umbrella. Their eyes were bright and this gave the bird an inquisitive look. Imaginative people compared it to a milk-maid or *gwalin* who has spilled *dahi* or yoghurt on herself.

Despite the perceived similarity to milk-maids, these birds did not drink milk. No bird ever did. Only mammals drank milk. These birds had a varied diet. They were particularly fond of nectar, insects and worms. They foraged in the Silk cotton tree as well as on the ground, where they hopped about with their tail raised. They were sometimes surprised by the female Sunbird that came often to inspect the ripening pods of cotton and to tease out tiny bits of fibre with which to lace her pouch-like nest. But today, they had surprised poor Jats as he was resting in Cheel Ghar.

The Squirrel too came often to Cheel Ghar when it stood empty. She came to

steal bits and pieces such as the soft rag that Mrs Milvus Cheel had used as nest lining. She tugged also at the piece of plastic embedded between the smaller branches that formed the framework of the nest but was unable to remove it.

By early May, the Queen's flower tree began to put forth it lovely flowers. The purple or pink-white flowers bore crumpled looking petals that looked as if they had been fashioned out of crepe paper. The Tailorbirds were frequent visitors to this tree and spent a lot of time chirping loudly from its branches.

The Squirrel did not desert the Silk cotton tree now that it had no flowers left. She came to nibble at the green shoots, the last of the petals and to eat the oil-rich cotton seeds inside the pods. She chomped on the cotton pods spilling

The Squirrel did not desert the Silk cotton tree now that it had no flowers left.

Squirrel

Many birds gleefully carried away the silky soft cotton. The Common mynah was one such.

the tufts of cotton. The burst pods also lay scattered like tiny wooden petals. Their duty was done. They had safely ensconced the seeds with their cotton parachutes till the seeds were ready to be blown away.

The ground beneath the tree was littered with tiny tufts of cotton; each with a seed embedded in its centre.

Many birds gleefully carried away the silky soft cotton. The Common mynah was one such. But now that Jats was a big bird, who needed very little supervision apart from his daily meals, his parents

Kite family

merely kept a lazy watch on the Mynah's activities and were not unduly perturbed by its presence. They did not launch an immediate attack even when it walked right into Cheel Ghar and started poking and prying to see what it could remove from it.

During the monsoon, and until the end of the year, the Silk Cotton tree provided good shade, since it remained covered with fresh green, spreading leaves. The Cheel couple knew that one season had ended. Not till next December, or maybe even February next year, would they need the Cheel Ghar again to raise another chick, maybe two. From their high perches, Jatayu, Mr and Mrs Milvus Cheel kept an eye on what was going on below. From time to time, one of them would let out an ear splitting shrill cry as if to say, "All is well."

A new Silk cotton tree had sprouted when a seed enveloped in silky cotton had found its way to fertile soil after the pods had burst. Its tender green leaves shone in the Sun. The breeze set them nodding as if to reply to the Cheel couple. "How right you are. All is well indeed."

From their high perches, Jatayu, Mr and Mrs Milvus Cheel kept an eye on what was going on below. From time to time, one of them would let out an ear splitting shrill cry as if to say, "All is well."

Birds

Common Name	Scientific Name	Size
Alexandrine Parakeet	*Psittacula eupatria*	50 cm
Ashy Prinia	*Prinia socialis*	13 cm
Asian Koel	*Eudynamys scolopacea*	42 cm
Black-rumped Flameback or Golden-backed Woodpecker	*Dinopium benghalense*	27 cm
Blue Rock Pigeon	*Columba livia*	32 cm
Cattle Egret	*Bubulcus ibis*	50 cm
Common or House Crow	*Corvus splendens*	45 cm
Common Grey Hornbill	*Tockus birostris*	65 cm
Common Mynah	*Acridotheres tristis*	22 cm
Coppersmith Barbet	*Megalaima haemacephala*	15 cm
Drongo	*Dicrurus adsimilis*	30 cm
Eurasian Collared Dove	*Streptopelia decaocto*	30 cm
Green Barbet or Brown-headed Barbet	*Megalaima zeylanica*	25 cm
Hoopoe	*Upopa eupops*	30 cm
House Sparrow	*Passer domesticus*	15 cm
Indian Golden Oriole	*Oriolus kundoo*	25 cm
Indian or Rufous Tree-pie	*Dendrocitta vagabunda*	45 cm
Indian Vulture	*Gyps indicus*	90 cm

Common Name	Scientific Name	Size
Indian White-eye	*Zosterops palpebrosa*	10 cm
Jungle Babbler	*Turdoides striatus*	25 cm
Jungle Crow	*Corvus macrorhynchos*	50 cm
Laughing Dove	*Streptopelia senegalensis*	25 cm
Lesser Coucal	*Centropus bengalensis*	34 cm
Little Green Bee-eater	*Merops orientalis*	22 cm
Oriental Magpie Robin	*Copsychus saularis*	20 cm
Peafowl	*Pavo cristatus*	Male: 210 cm Female: 100 cm.
Pied Mynah or Asian Pied Starling	*Sturnus contra*	23 cm
Plum-headed Parakeet	*Psittacula cyanocephala*	37 cm
Purple Sunbird	*Nectarinia asiatica*	10 cm
Red-naped Ibis/Indian Black Ibis	*Pseudibis papillosa*	68 cm
Red-vented Bulbul	*Pycnonotus cafer*	20 cm
Red-wattled Lapwing	*Vanellus indicus*	35 cm
Red-whiskered	*Bulbul Pycnonotus jocosus*	20 cm
Rose-ringed Parakeet	*Psittacula krameri*	40 cm
Rosy Pastor	*Sturnus roseus*	23 cm
Shikra	*Accipiter badius*	33 cm

Common Name	Scientific Name	Size
Small Indian Kite/Pariah Kite	*Milvus migrans*	65 cm
Spotted Owlet	*Athene brama*	20 cm
Tailorbird	*Orthotomus sutorius*	13 cm
White- breasted Kingfisher	*Halcyon smyrnensis*	27 cm
White-rumped	*Munia Lonchura striata*	10 cm
Yellow-footed Green Pigeon	*Treron phoenicoptera*	33 cm

Trees & Plants

English name	Scientific name	Hindi name
Arjuna	*Terminulia arjuna*	Arjun
Banana	*Musa hybrids*	Kela
Banyan	*Ficus benghalensis*	Bargad
Common fig	*Ficus carica*	Anjeer
Flame of the Forest or Parrot tree	*Butea monosperma*	Dhaak, Palaash, Tesu
Frangipani	*Plumeria obtusa*	Champa
Guava	*Psidium guajava*	Amrood
Indian Coral tree or Sunshine tree	*Erythrina variegata*	Pangara
Indian Rosewood	*Dalbergia sissoo*	Shisham, Sisu
Jackfruit	*Artocarpus heterophyllus*	Kath-hal

English name	Scientific name	Hindi name
Java Plum	*Syzygium cumini*	Jamun
Laburnum	*Cassia fistula*	Amaltas
Lantana	*Lantana camara*	Raimunia
Mango	*Mangifera indica*	Aam
Mulberry	*Morus alba*	Shah-toot
Neem	*Azadirachta indica*	Neem
Oleander	*Nerium oleander*	Kaner
Pearl millet	*Pennisetum glaucum*	Bajra
Peepul	*Ficus religiosa*	Pipal
Queen's flower or Queen of flowers	*Lagerstroemia flos-reginae*	Jarul
Rangoon creeper	*Quisqualis indica*	Madhumalati
Royal Poinciana	*Delonix regia*	Gul-mohar
Sacred Basil	*Occimum sanctum*	Tulsi
Silk Cotton	*Bombax ceiba*	Seemul
Sorghum	*Sorghum sp.*	Jowar

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This book introduces children to the many species of birds and trees in and around our neighbourhood. Told by a pair of Kites, Mr and Mrs Cheel, the book takes us through their life, their features, their habits and habitats as well as the joys and travails of raising their chick in a world where their habitats are dwindling and human hostility is on the rise.

Enriched by photographs, the book also encourages children to explore the boundaries of their local environment, the parks and playgrounds. The joy of spotting a bird's nest hidden in foliage; the excitement of seeing a species for the first time, or the thrill of watching the first flight taken by a fledgling... the rewards of close observation are many. And the Cheel couple's commentary enlivens narration at every step through the book, inspiring the young generation to recognize and care for biodiversity.

Sukanya Datta acquired her doctorate in zoology from the University of Calcutta, before joining the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research as a Scientist. In over twenty years as a science communicator, she has authored and co-authored many popular science books including an encyclopedia of S&T. Apart from being a regular contributor to All India Radio, she has also authored four compilations of science fiction stories: *Beyond the Blue*, *Other Skies*, *Once Upon a Blue Moon* and *Worlds Apart*, the last two published by NBT.

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